

Gladys Mitchell

The Whispering Knights



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To

JEHANE

with loving thanks for finding the bookshop in Stornoway and for her
photographs and descriptions of the Rollright Stones



THE WHISPERING KNIGHTS

Chapter 1

CAPELLA'S PILGRIMAGE

‘As far inland as Stourton Tower
And Camelot and starlit Stonehenge.’
Thomas Hardy



When he was thirty-six years old, Henry Babbacombe married Miriam Starr. He was in a good position to marry, for, in addition to a small but useful private income derived from money left him by an uncle, he wrote a weekly column on such popular matters as astrology, extra-sensory perception, ghosts and other hauntings, unidentified flying objects, the Loch Ness monster, palmistry, the Tarot, the Bermuda Triangle, magical numbers, the secrets of the Pyramids and the mystery of the Marie Celeste.

He chose his wife because of her surname, which he soon added to his own, so that his four children rejoiced in the snobbish distinction of being registered as Babbacombe-Starr. Moreover, they were all christened for one or other of the heavenly bodies. The eldest was called Arcturus; the second, a girl, Vega; the next, another boy, Deneb; and the youngest, again a girl, was given the name (pretty, she thought, until she turned it up in the Latin dictionary) of Capella.

The boys soon changed their names. Arcturus became Arthur, his brother settled for Dane. Vega decided that the nearest acceptable change would be to call herself Vera, but she never had much liking for Truth, holding, wisely perhaps, that one got through life more easily by extricating oneself from dangerous or embarrassing situations by telling a useful, innocuous lie or two. Capella, even when she discovered that her name was anything but glamorous, never attempted to change it. Always superstitious, she thought it would be unlucky to do so.

The children were carefully spaced at two-yearly intervals, and it was when Arcturus was eighteen and Capella twelve that Henry carried out a holiday plan which had been in his mind for some time.

‘My dear,’ he said to his wife on a sunny June afternoon when he had posted his weekly article, ‘I have a great idea for this year’s summer vacation.’

‘Arc and Den are booked to travel with their school party to Greece. Had you forgotten that?’ asked Miriam.

‘By no means. There is nothing to stop them. I approve of these scholastic jaunts. They go off as soon as the school breaks up, so there will be plenty of time left for this holiday of mine.’

‘What do you intend?’

‘Well, I have been doing some serious reading on the subject of prehistoric stone circles and I learn that Ancient Man aligned his temples with one or other

of the stars. In this book our children's names are mentioned, so I thought it would be rather fun to visit some of the sites. It will not only be a pleasant pilgrimage, but an educational one as well. I shall have to make a careful selection, of course. We shall not have time to visit every stone circle which is connected with Arcturus, Vega, Deneb and Capella, but I've already roughed out a possible route which I think we could cover well inside a fortnight and which includes the right stars.'

'The children have already seen Stonehenge and Avebury.'

'Ah, but those don't come within the scope of my itinerary. I was thinking of the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire for Capella, and the Hurlers on Bodmin Moor for Vega. The Hurlers would do for Arc, too, except that he won't want to share with his sister.'

'You make him sound very selfish. He is not a selfish boy.'

'Of course not, but, as it happens, there is also Nant Tawr for him in Wales. Then for Den there is the Druids' Circle, also in Wales. That sounds rather fascinating, don't you think?'

'But probably has nothing to do with the druids. Whereabouts in Wales?'

'Caernarvonshire.'

'The children would be more interested in the castle and Snowdonia, I expect.'

'Don't you like my scheme?'

'I hope you will be careful what you say to Capella about it. You know how imaginative she is. There is another thing. If the boys go to Greece we must make it up to the girls in some way. We have never favoured one sex more than the other and I have had some strong hints from Vega on the subject. She is always talking about a schoolfriend who went to Paris last year.'

'Oh, I don't think Paris is a very good idea. If she wanted to visit the Louvre I might agree, but all she would be interested in would be the dress-shops and the restaurants. I might consider Rome for her and Capella if we could fix up a package tour.'

'Rome has fashion-shops and restaurants too.'

'It also has the Coliseum, the ancient *agora* and any number of churches, and there might be a chance for the girls to see the Pope.'

'I thought *agora* was a Greek word. Don't you mean the *forum*?'

'Yes, I suppose I do. You are always so well-informed, my dear. You continually surprise me and always pleasantly.'

'Do we let the girls know that there is the chance we may take them to

Rome?’

‘Oh, I think so. Even if we can’t get a package tour I can manage the air fares and we need not stay at the most expensive hotel. My colleague Camforth lived in Rome for some years. That is one reason why I thought of it. He will advise me.’

‘I wish the two girls got on together as well as the boys do, but it can’t be expected. Vega already thinks of herself as a young woman.’

‘Well, she is sixteen and has boyfriends, whereas Capella is only twelve and still a child. We can’t expect them to have much in common until Vega is at least twenty and Capella sixteen. They will then be in one another’s confidence and we shall be the outsiders in their lives. One must be realistic about these things.’

‘Capella is cleverer than Vega was at her age. Academically I think she will soon outgrow her.’

‘As Den physically will outgrow Arc. He is much bigger and stronger at fourteen than Arc was. The protective boot may be on the other foot in a year or two.’

‘So long as it isn’t a bower boot!’ said Miriam. ‘I couldn’t stand a bullying hooligan for a son.’

‘The contingency is an unlikely one, my dear. Heredity and environment are both on your side in the matter.’

Returned from their excursions abroad, the four children exchanged experiences and did a considerable amount of mild boasting. Vega, under the watchful but indulgent eye of her father — her mother had remained behind at the hotel with Capella — had danced with young Italians whom she compared favourably for looks and manners with the English boys of her acquaintance; Arcturus was inclined to hold forth on the subject of Greek politics and never once mentioned the Acropolis or the visit to Delphi; Deneb had sampled ouzo, which he described as ‘exciting but nasty’, and Capella had so stuffed herself with pasta in all its varieties that she was in danger of having to be put on a diet for the remainder of the holidays for fear that her school uniform would no longer go round her.

‘Well,’ said Henry resignedly, ‘it seems unlikely that they will take an intelligent interest in stone circles if the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome have made no mark on them.’

‘Oh, but at least they all enjoyed themselves,’ said Miriam.

‘We are a disappointment to our parents,’ said Arcturus. ‘They wanted us to imbibe their kind of culture and we haven’t done it.’

‘Of course we have,’ said Vega. ‘Dad said that travel broadens the mind. My mind is a great deal broader than before I went to Rome.’

‘So is Cappie’s tummy,’ said Arcturus, giving it a brotherly prod. ‘Anyway, we must feign an interest in these stone circles. We’ve had our fun. It’s only fair that Dad should have his.’

Upon this admirable estimate of the situation they crammed themselves into the big, powerful car which towed the caravan (both had been hired) and prepared to make the best of what they foresaw would be a dull fortnight.

Henry, who, in spite of a certain formality of speech, was anything but a pedant, had prepared himself for this reaction and had done the best he could to combat it. He had spent hours poring over books and was well primed not only with up-to-date information of a serious character, but with a fund of anecdotes, legends, superstitions and surmises which he thought would amuse his children. The nature of his job as a columnist made him an interesting and accomplished *raconteur* and this, coupled with his family’s own good intentions, turned what might have been an irksome pilgrimage into a pleasant holiday. Nobody could have foreseen the ultimate effect it would have on Capella. That was with the gods.

The expedition started off in good weather. There was soon the pride of possession, too. To hear a circle of impressive size referred to as ‘*your* stones, Capella, which you share with the sun and the moon and, at times, a coven of witches’, was gratifying to a romantic twelve-year-old and when this was followed by the legend of the disappointed king, the Whispering Knights and the myth that the stones walked down the hill to drink water, especially on New Year’s Night, there was a thrilling story to take to bed. Capella, an imaginative child, made her own variations on it and these included marriage to the king and the ritual slaughter of the Whispering Knights.

‘There’s another story that Dad hasn’t told us,’ said Vega. ‘It’s sexy, but I’ll tell it you if you like.’

‘I know all about sex. We have it at school,’ said Capella, ‘but you can tell me if you want to. I expect it will be another of your lies, but I shan’t mind that. Is it a nasty story? Does anybody get murdered in pools of blood?’

‘No. It’s only about bosoms. If your lover can’t give you a baby, you have to press your breasts against the stones.’

‘Which stones?’

‘I don’t suppose it matters. Dad’s book did say, but I suppose any of them would do.’

‘Dad would be livid if he knew you’d handled his book. He paid ten pounds for it.’

‘I wonder how the bookseller knew the price? It hasn’t got it inside and I should think it would be in dollars, not pounds, because it’s an American publication.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It mentions Yale University Press, but I think they’re in London as well.’

‘The London ones would be in pounds, wouldn’t they? I’m glad I don’t have to share my Rollright Stones with anyone. You have to share yours with Arcturus, Dad said.’

‘Oh, I’m not worrying about the stones. I’m not that much interested. There’s a nice-looking boy in another caravan on this site. He’s invited me to sneak over there and drink lager and play records. He’s with two other boys and no parents.’

‘You’d better ask if you can go, not just sneak over.’

‘That would take away all the romance.’

‘But when could you go?’

‘We’re not leaving here until Dad has found out whether he can count the stones. They say you can’t, but I think it would be easy enough if he made one of us stand by one particular stone and not move away until he had finished counting. I don’t see how that could fail, however many stones there are.’

‘He said there weren’t all that number in the first place, but lumps have fallen off and now get counted as proper stones. Perhaps bits are still falling off and the number you count one day would be the wrong number the next day.’

‘While he’s counting I could slip away.’

The sisters were able to hold this conversation because the four-berth caravan had two compartments. The girls had single beds in one of these and the parents a double bed in the other, with a bulkhead and a communicating door in between. The boys slept in a tent pitched alongside the caravan and enjoyed the feeling of independence which this arrangement gave them.

‘You’re lucky not to have a holiday task,’ said Deneb to Arcturus. ‘I’ve got to sweat when we get home.’

‘Well, I’ve left school. The Greek thing was my last contact. Besides, I’ve plenty of reading to do before I go up.’

‘Are you looking forward to Oxford?’

‘I suppose so. I haven’t thought about that side of it.’

‘When I go up I shall get my Blue.’

‘Chance is a fine thing!’

‘For boxing or football. I’ll see how I shape.’

‘Hope springs eternal! You’ve yet to get into the school colts.’

‘I’m a cert for the House third, Corrall says.’

‘Oh, well, that’s a start.’

‘Do you mind going to kip as early as I do?’

‘No, not on holiday. It’s different at home. I should jib at doing it there, but there’s nothing on earth to do here once it gets dark. There isn’t even a handy pub.’

‘They didn’t have the same rules in Greece, did they? Age limits and that kind of thing.’

‘Oh, I’ve been into English pubs often enough even since I was sixteen.’

‘On your own?’

‘No fun on your own. Half-a-dozen of us used to go in the dinner-hour. We took some girls in once, but not again.’

‘Why not? Did they get sloshed?’

‘We didn’t buy them enough for that. The trouble was that they only drank shorts.’

‘Sherry?’

‘No fear! Gin, and doubles at that. They had us skinned by the time we came out.’

‘Couldn’t you have got sacked?’

‘Not for the drinks. Some of the fellows were eighteen, anyway. I think there might have been trouble about the girls, though. They were from the woollen mill and pretty hot stuff. But, look here, don’t *you* go trying anything on!’

‘I don’t like girls.’

‘Time will remedy that. Anyway, I meant the beer when you’re under age, not the girls. You stick to boxing and football.’

‘What do you bet I get my Blue in my first year?’

‘Don’t worry. You won’t.’

‘Do you think beer puts muscle on a man?’

‘No, only superfluous fat.’

‘Rugger players drink gallons of beer.’

‘Yes, but they sweat it off when they’re playing.’

In the morning, under Henry’s directions, the party took it in turn to count the Rollright Stones and great was Capella’s satisfaction when no two tallies agreed. ‘My stones *are* magic,’ she said. ‘Great is Capella of the magic stones!’

Vega, come with me. I want to register a vow, and if you make a vow you need a witness.'

'What vow are you going to make?'

'A lovely pagan vow. Come on! I have to make it to the King Stone. I shall kneel down, and you must kneel down, too, otherwise he won't listen and the vow won't be any good.'

'Don't be silly. You can't make a vow to a stone. Where is the King Stone, anyway?'

'You have to go outside the entrance of the circle. The woman said so when she took Daddy's money for us to come in. You walk along the lane and there's a stile and the King Stone is on top of a little hill,'

'I'm not going to bother. Get Arc or Den to go with you. You'd better not be trotting off alone. You know how you go dreaming on and get yourself lost.'

'It's only a little way and you can tell them where I am if they ask. Perhaps it will be better without a witness, then it will be just between him and me.'

'You're crazy.'

Capella ignored this opinion, which she had heard before, left the stone circle and walked along the lane. The slope uphill from the stile was fairly steep and when she reached the King Stone she stood and breathed the cool upland air for a moment before she fell on her knees in front of the railings which enclosed the ugly but impressive lump of badly-weathered, seemingly pock-marked oolite.

'You are my mystic, magic king,' she said, reaching forward through the railings. 'I am your vassal and you are my liege lord. For you I will see Long Compton in your name, and King of England you shall be in the great hereafter, and thereto I, Capella, pledge thee my troth and the Whispering Traitors shall look upon death.

"When Long Compton I shall see,
King of England thou shalt be,
So rise up stick, and wake up, stone,
For I, Capella, I alone,
Will change these stones to men, I ween,
And eldern tree shall be thy queen." '

She rose to her feet, bowed three times to the King Stone and, proud of her extemporised parody on the original rhyme, she returned to the stile and then went on along the lane. There was more to be done before she returned to the stone circle of the King's Men. Her father had told her that the legends had been created by people who had no idea of the origin or purpose of the stone circle,

but to Capella the legends were the facts. The stories which had grown up around the stone circle about the King's Men awaiting the word to advance upon Long Compton but never receiving it because of a witchcraft curse, the desolate, disappointed King and the treachery of the five whispering Knights were a matter of historical truth, so far as she was concerned. It was for her, Capella, whose star was aligned on the Rollright Stones, to swear allegiance to the thwarted and frustrated king. Having done that, the traitor knights must be faced. She walked on until she found the path alongside a field of barley. Then she came to the portal dolmen called the Whispering Knights. She put out her tongue at the stones which were huddled together behind another protective railing.

'You plotters and traitors!' she said. 'Someone shall die for this! You may be fenced round, but you are not safe from the vengeance which is to come.'

The three upright and two fallen stones appeared unmoved by this threat, but as she made her way back to the stone circle of the King's Men, the wind whispered in the barley and she wondered whether the Knights were pursuing her with these whisperings or were discussing among themselves what she had said.

'I shouldn't think those stones would roll very far, whether they rolled right or wrong,' said Deneb, when the family were returning to the caravan for lunch before setting out on the next stage of their journey.

'Nothing to do with rolling,' said his father. 'The name has been bowdlerised to something which can be pronounced by the illiterate. Rollright comes from the Anglo-Saxon, most likely, and, according to my book, simply means the property of a nobleman called Hrolla.'

'The King was not called Hrolla,' said Capella.

'No, he would not be called by a Saxon name,' said her father. 'He lived, if he lived at all, much longer ago than that. The stones are a prehistoric monument.'

When they went to bed that night, Capella boasted to her sister of the vow she had made.

'You shouldn't have uttered blasphemy or used your own name,' said Vega. 'That circle is a temple. Didn't you know? They probably offered human sacrifices there.'

'I wasn't inside the circle and I know about the sacrifices. There would be blood. They had to have lots and lots of blood. They collected it in sort of primitive bowls and splashed it all over themselves, rejoicing in the warmth and the stickiness. Then their gods gave them all the beauty and strength and courage

the dead person had had. My King came later than that. I'm sure he was good and kind.'

Vega was not impressed. She said, 'I wish I was beautiful, but my nose is too big.'

'Miss Weston says a big nose denotes character. Wellington had a big nose. Do you think that's why he defeated Napoleon?' asked Capella.

Vega aired a grievance. 'Now I am sixteen I could go and visit boys in other caravans as often as I like and Dad wouldn't be able to stop me because I am over the age of consent,' she said angrily. 'We were only going to play records, but he stopped me.'

After the Rollright Stones the rest of the tour was disappointing. The Hurlers, in spite of their name, gave no suggestion of previous energetic action, but turned out to be called Hurlers because of a local superstition that they were men changed to stone because they had desecrated the Sabbath by playing their favourite game on a Sunday. Moreover, the site was in a depressing area of abandoned mine-workings and industrial squalor and consisted of three circles close together, which mustered twenty-two recumbent stones and only seventeen upright ones.

It proved useless for Henry to point out the importance of the site. Its surroundings and the number of fallen stones rendered it uninteresting to his wife and children, and he felt obliged to walk his party a couple of extra miles to look at Trethevy Quoit, a most spectacular closed megalithic burial chamber nine feet high, with three of its four uprights still supporting its capstone. It was not on his itinerary, but the family reported that the structure was satisfyingly grand, majestic and mysterious, so he felt happier when they had seen it.

'Were there any bones inside?' asked Deneb. His father said that he did not know, but that there were two more stone circles on his list. Miriam wondered whether it was necessary to visit both of them.

'Arc is willing, after all, to share the Hurlers with Vega,' she said, 'so I think we could cut out Nant Tawr and concentrate on the Druids' Circle for Den, don't you? The Druids' Circle! I love the name, although, as I said before, I doubt whether the Druids come into the picture. They would have been later, wouldn't they?'

'Oh, the circles were altered, added to, partially destroyed — this, that and the other — as the ages passed. My book calls the two circles at Nant Tawr 'unobtrusive', so I hardly think they would impress the children. It was a great mistake to introduce them first to the Rollrights,' said Henry. 'I see that now.'

‘What we all want to visit is Caernarvon Castle,’ said Miriam. ‘It would be a pity to miss it, don’t you think, as we shall be in Wales anyway?’

So Caernarvon Castle was put on the agenda and proved, greatly to Henry’s disappointment, to be the high spot of the holiday.

When they were home again and, except for Arcturus, who had gone up for his first term at Oxford, life had returned to normal, Henry involved himself in the question of how man, through the ages, had experimented with the measurement of time. He made a study of clocks and watches both antique and modern, theorised about the right time, true time, solar time, sidereal time, (this almost brought him back to stone circles), Greenwich Mean time, standard time and local time.

He studied marine chronometers, the pendulum, water-clocks, sundials, scratch-dials, hour-glasses, egg-timers, light-signals, lighthouse flashes, ships’ sirens, minute-guns and parking-meters. It was all enjoyable and most absorbing, and his interest in stone circles may be said to have died a timely death.

There was one of his children who did not forget them, though. Capella often thought of her vow and planned that when she was older she would visit her King again. She remembered, also, her threat to the Whispering Knights.

She was, and remained, an imaginative child and in ways to which she confessed later she was the victim of adolescent stresses and strains which, as is often the case, seemed more mental than physical. It was her mind and her emotions which posed the problems, for physically there could hardly have been a healthier, more vigorous or less illness-prone youngster.

However, when she grew older and the strains of adolescence were a thing of the past, it seemed as though her father’s absorption in the measurement of time had coloured her dreams.

She became convinced, as time went on, that there was no such thing as Time; that what had happened, what was happening, and what was to happen were all, as it were, on one plane. She saw this plane as a huge sheet of paper on which the various dates, instead of appearing vertically as a historical time-chart, were horizontal and given no centuries, no guide-lines, no digits, no B.C. or A.D., but were mingled, mixed, revolving and, in a sense, as meaningless as a kaleidoscope.

Her dream-images were as fantastic as those of her waking mind, and yet they were very much clearer and always made a common-sense and comprehensible picture, unchaotic and inevitable. There was a recurring theme: every picture appeared to be confined inside a rectangle, and what it portrayed

was bound to come true. These were the dreams that she recollected most vividly when she woke up in the morning. Sometimes the rectangle was merely a matter of four lines; sometimes it had depth and appeared in the form of a hole in the ground; at other times it had height and was enclosed by four thin slabs of stone, as was the hole in the ground; sometimes it was of indeterminate shape, hardly rectangular at all.

The dreams were sometimes frightening, but they faded when she began to have adolescent love affairs, and they disappeared altogether when she went to College.

Chapter 2

LONG MEG AND HER DAUGHTERS

‘E’en such is Time, that takes in trust
Our youth, our joys and all we have,
And pays us with but earth and dust.’
Sir Walter Raleigh



Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley turned the gaze of a benevolent serpent upon her secretary. Laura Gavin was at her usual task of sorting out the morning's post.

'Looks a pretty run-of-the-mill lot today,' Laura remarked, as she finished making four small piles of envelopes, 'unless one whose flap is adorned with a college coat-of-arms, addressed to you and marked *Personal* turns out to be of any interest. I expect it's only to ask you to give a lecture or award a prize or adjudicate for something or other.'

'Pray open it and let me know the worst. I thought, though, that the universities were already on Long Vacation.'

'Perhaps it's an invitation to a garden party or a conference, then.' Laura slit open the envelope and read its contents. 'Oh, no. It's an invitation all right, but not to a Faculty jamboree exactly. It's signed by somebody called Q. X. Owen and he wants to know whether we — I am included and even named — would care to join a party of archaeologists who are going to spend about a fortnight studying stone circles in the north-west of England and the islands of Arran and the Outer Hebrides. We pay our own expenses and use our own car, it seems, but this Owen will make all the hotel bookings and, generally speaking, stage-manage the trip.'

Dame Beatrice put down an empty coffee-cup and took the letter. When she had glanced through it she said, 'He gives a telephone number. Ring up the college and ask for more details.'

'Yes, we don't accept any blind dates,' said Laura. 'I don't know why, but I distrust the letter X.'

'Dear me! Were you poor at algebra? Besides, what of St. Francis Xavier?'

'Also the initial Q,' went on Laura, ignoring what she recognised as flippancy. 'It makes me think of spy stories, a form of literature I can't do with.'

'Such prejudice distresses me. What of Leonard Q. Rossiter, the inspired creator of Hyman Kaplan?'

'It wasn't his real name. I'll go and phone, shall I?'

She returned to report that Q. X. Owen was a professor — 'the porter didn't say of what' — that he was not in residence during the Long Vacation, but that all correspondence would be re-directed to his home in Exeter.

'The Q. X. rings a bell,' said Dame Betrice, 'and Owen was his first name

when I gave a lecture at his college. His surname then was Le Mans. I wonder why he changed it?’

‘The answer’s a lemon,’ said Laura.

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘there is nothing on hand at the moment that our London clinic cannot deal with. Do you wish to inspect the lithographs of our forefathers?’

‘Lithographs? I thought those were pictures.’

‘Many of the prehistoric stones are engraved with chevron-shaped incisions, circles, spirals, maze-cuttings and cup-marks, all of which must have had mystic significance and would have been of ritual religious origin.’

‘Let’s go. I’m always prepared to broaden my mind. I wonder what the rest of the party will be like? Only ten of us, he says. The last of the sites he mentions, after we’ve dropped two of the lot in Inverness, is Callanish on Lewis. I’d love to go there.’

Capella, who had the promise of a temporary tutoring post towards the end of August, borrowed the money from her father and set off for Exeter on the appointed day to have lunch with her fellow-enthusiasts. She had realised, from the wording of the professor’s reply to her letter of application, that the party would be a small one, but she was somewhat surprised to find that, including herself, only six people were present at the inaugural lunch.

Telephone conversations had informed her that none of her college friends was to be of the party, although two said that they had applied and had been told that the required number of places had been filled. When she arrived, the members were already assembled and were having cocktails in the bar. The leader, Professor Owen, was wearing a white rose in his buttonhole as he had promised, so she went over to him and introduced herself. He was a handsome man whose white hair gave the lie to his otherwise youthful appearance. He introduced the others, beginning with an oddly beautiful, daunting woman of about thirty whose reception of the introduction of her disdainful self as ‘my cousin Catherine, who, among other things, writes novels’, was an unnerving glare and a suspicious and unfriendly, ‘How d’you do?’ Then Owen took Capella round the rest of the circle.

There was a youngish couple who were presented under the names of Lionel and Clarissa Smith. They turned out to own one of the two cars which were to take the party northwards. They appeared to be amiable, although not very interesting, she thought, and obviously were absorbed only in one another. Clarissa giggled when Capella was introduced, and said that everybody thought

of that lovely little light opera, but Lionel and Clarissa was how they had been christened and there was nothing they could do about it. When she and Lionel had first met, she informed Capella, they had decided that this was Fate, so there was nothing to be done about that, either. They simply had to like one another.

The only other member of the party in the bar was a man named Stewart, who did not look more than twenty years old. Capella put him down as an undergraduate and took him for one of Owen's students. He told her that he was 'completely red-brick educated' and had 'only come along for the ride'. That brought the party up to six, but after lunch two more members appeared. One was a small elderly lady with a reptilian smile not calculated to put anybody at ease, who was introduced as Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley. Her companion, a tall, goodlooking woman whose name was Mrs Laura Gavin, shook hands firmly and asked whether this was all the ship's company. Capella then heard Owen say to the elderly lady,

'I see that you were chauffeur-driven, Dame Beatrice. Is the driver your own man?'

'Yes, indeed,' Dame Beatrice answered. 'George by name, but not a farmer by nature or inclination.'

'Oh, dear! I am afraid no accommodation has been booked for him, and we are moving off tomorrow morning as soon as the Sisters get here,' said Owen.

This, for Capella, disposed of one mystery. There were now eight people present and her letter of acceptance had mentioned a possible ten. If two sisters were expected, (she wondered whose sisters they were, not, of course, being able to detect the capital letter in Owen's voice), they would make up the numbers and account for the three cars. Dame Beatrice went on to explain to Owen that her chauffeur would be returning home by train and that Mrs Gavin 'who is looking forward so much to Arran and Lewis,' would be driving their car during the tour.

Next morning, with everybody out on the forecourt waiting for the allocation of seats in the cars, the last two members of the party arrived. They were two nuns, a tall, impressive, stately one who appeared to be about sixty years old and whose hair showed iron-grey where it appeared at the front of her headdress, and a young, pretty one, grey-eyed, fair-haired, shy, and deferential to her companion. They were brought by another nun who did not stay to be introduced, but, having helped them retrieve their luggage from the boot, said farewell to them and drove back to the convent from which, they explained, they had come away after Mass. They hoped they had not kept the party waiting.

Owen introduced them as Sister Pascal and Sister Veronica. They wore dark grey *cappas* over their blue habits, black shoes and, as both were fully professed, black veils. Owen had their modest suitcases put into his own car and gave them the back seat in it while he and his cousin Catherine sat in front. Capella had been allotted a back seat in Lionel's car, Clarissa sat beside him in the front and the fourth seat was taken by Stewart. Dame Beatrice and Laura Gavin brought up the tail of the procession in Dame Beatrice's own car, and the cavalcade took the motor road which ran northward from Exeter.

Under cover of the conversation which was being carried on between the two on the front seat, Stewart said to Capella, 'What do I call you? Miss Babbacombe-Starr sounds a bit off-putting.'

'Why does it?'

'Too long, too toffee-nosed and too unfriendly.'

'Capella, then.'

'Right. Stewart here, as you know. I say, which of us has the old lady got her eye on?'

'How do you mean?'

'*La Grande Dame* must have been tipped off that one of us is reputed to have a tile loose.'

'I still don't understand you.'

'Oh, come, now! You recognised her, didn't you?'

'Well, I've never actually met her until now, but she came to Oxford once and spoke in the Union debate.'

'Well, then?'

'I don't suppose she is keeping an eye on anybody. Why should she?'

'Well, she certainly hasn't come along for the ride, like me, or the pleasure of my company, like you. Least of all has she come to look at, measure, align and speculate upon standing stones and chambered tombs. That means she's here professionally, and I think it very cagey and unfriendly in our leader not to have warned us. You obviously weren't warned, and neither was I, and, judging by the expression on the other faces when she and her henchwoman were introduced, neither was anybody else. When I get to know what Mrs Gavin has termed 'the ship's company' a little better, I will propose a small wager as to which one of us she's been told to watch out for. Are you on?'

'I don't bet. Can't afford it. Anyway, I'm sure you're talking nonsense. Why shouldn't she and Mrs Gavin take an interest in standing stones like anybody else?'

‘I’ve told you why. Besides, if that had been the case we should all have been told she was coming along, but we weren’t. QED. don’t you think?’

‘No, I don’t. It’s just your imagination.’

‘Don’t possess any.’

‘Your lack of it, then.’

‘Don’t you like me?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘I sulk when people don’t like me.’

‘Sulk away.’

It was an agreeable conversation, Capella thought. Her holiday was getting off to a good start. Stewart was going to be companionable and amusing. Besides, he had given her something to think about. Perhaps it *was* a little strange that, although he had given the names of some of the others who were to join the party, Owen’s letter had made no mention of Dame Beatrice, that eminent psychologist, and psychiatric adviser and consultant to the Home Office. Surely the thought of travelling in such august company might well have been put forward as an added attraction to the tour, thought Capella. She turned the matter over in her mind and then, since this was unprofitable, she changed the subject.

‘Where do the nuns come from?’ she asked.

‘From somewhere in the Midlands, I expect. There are lots of convents up there.’

‘Then why didn’t we pick them up in the Midlands? Why did they have to come to Exeter? Anyway, what could be their interest in a tour of this sort?’

‘No idea. You had better ask them.’

After a lunch at one of the motorway cafés, the travellers took the M6 to Penrith where they were to spend the night. The whole of the next day was to be passed in examining the two stone circles near Little Salkeld and Keswick and another night spent at Penrith before crossing the Border. Then the party would travel to Ardrossan and take the car ferry over to Arran to examine the circles on Machrie Moor.

That first evening most of the others retired early, leaving Stewart and Capella in the lounge to watch television. They saw the late programme through and then Stewart asked her whether she would join him in an early-morning walk.

‘You know, before breakfast,’ he said. ‘They don’t serve it until eight, and it’s a pity to miss the dawn in these parts.’

Capella was dubious about waking up in time to take a dawn walk, but promised to meet him at six if she could force herself to get up. She did wake in the early hours and at just after six she found him waiting for her in the hotel vestibule. He had pulled back the bolts on the outside door and they stepped out into the fresh morning air. To her surprise she found that they were going for a drive instead of a walk.

‘Well, some of it will be a walk,’ he said. ‘We’re going to have a look at Long Meg on our own.’

‘But what’s the point? We are all going to see the stones, anyway, after breakfast.’

‘I don’t want to go with the crowd. Much more fun just you and me. I conned Lionel into lending me his car keys and I know the way. We go through Langwathby, turn off for Little Salkeld, and the stones are about a mile further on. We can leave the car at the station or somewhere and walk the last bit. Then, while the others are looking at the stones later on in the morning, we can nip away on our own again and have lunch together.’

When they were in the car and heading north-east out of the town, she asked him again what he had meant by saying that Dame Beatrice had joined the party for reasons connected with her profession.

‘I told you yesterday,’ he said. ‘Obviously Owen thinks one of us has a screw loose and this excursion makes a good excuse for having an eminent psychiatrist go along and vet the company for signs of *non compos mentis*. He must suspect one of us.’

‘Perhaps he has heard about me and my purple past,’ said Capella, laughing.

‘You? You don’t look old enough to have a past, purple or otherwise, so don’t boast. It doesn’t become a young woman.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean *that* kind of past. I mean that when we were children — well, adolescents, I suppose — either my sister or I raised a poltergeist in the house.’

‘A poltergeist? Are there really such things?’

‘Oh, yes, indeed, but whether it was Vega or I who brought it into the family circle I don’t suppose we shall ever know. It couldn’t have been either of the boys, because Arc was up at Oxford at the time and Den was away at school. When they were at home for the holidays the silly old polt. didn’t materialise, so it must have fancied either one or other of us girls and got scared when the boys were in the house.’

‘But this is sensational! Do tell me. Did you *see* anything?’

‘We didn’t see the thing itself. I don’t believe anybody ever does; but it was up to all the usual antics, I assure you.’

‘Things hovering in the air and then crashing floorwards? Things getting hidden and then reappearing in unexpected places? Messages written on walls? Furniture travelling around and falling over without anybody being in the room? I’ve read about such things, but have always believed there was a human agency at work.’

‘Well, I suppose, in a sense, there must be. I mean, there seems no doubt that a young person, usually a young girl, acts as a medium for whatever it is that comes and haunts the place. I was thirteen at the time and Vega was seventeen, so I think it is more likely that I was the one. Of course, at the time I had no idea of what caused all the upheaval. I remember that my mother said she had been flung out of bed twice and an old cupboard we had in the attic certainly walked itself down two flights of stairs and knocked over the long-case clock in the hall. It was after that had happened that Mother got nervous and begged Father to move house.’

‘Good Lord! I should think she did! *Did* you move house?’

‘He wouldn’t hear of it. He said that it was all very interesting and that he was getting a lot of copy out of it. He was making a study of poltergeists at the time. He writes about paranormal happenings and astrology and things from outer space and the measurement of time, and all that sort of thing, you see, and had finished with time and gone on to poltergeists.’

‘So *your* poltergeist was literally meat and drink to him, of course. Besides, according to what I’ve read — Borley Rectory, the Wesley family, Hinton Ampner, that extraordinary business of the upended and displaced coffins in the sealed vault of the Chase family on Barbados, and lots of others — it wouldn’t have been any good if you *had* moved. The nuisance would have gone with you until whoever was its medium had lost the power to give it a home.’

‘Well, our little visitor stayed with us for nearly a year, but only on and off. I don’t believe my mother could have stood it if it had been with us without a break.’

‘So your father made money out of it and your mother was alarmed by it. How did you and your sister react?’

‘I think Vega was a bit scared, especially when we heard doors that we knew were locked being slammed and there were some loud knockings on the walls at night. Vega tried to reassure herself by saying that we must be in an area that had earth tremors, and that accounted for the noises and the furniture moving and my

mother being thrown out of bed, but I don't think she really believed it.'

'And you?'

'I'm afraid I thought it was all rather fun and certainly very exciting. The only things I didn't much like were the bells. That only happened twice, with two or three months in between. We woke up in the night to hear what sounded like at least half-a-dozen bells of the kind they used to have in big houses with lots of servants. They were jangling away quite madly.'

'Wouldn't your sister's theory about earth tremors have covered that?'

'It might have done, except that there wasn't a single bell of that sort in the house.'

'Except for the poltergeist, you haven't had any other supernatural experiences, I suppose?'

'No, thank goodness, only peculiar dreams. The strange thing is that I should be horribly scared if the poltergeist were to renew its visits now, although, as a child, only the bells disturbed me, so far as I remember.'

'You know, Capella, I'm not sure you ought to be coming on this tour. These stone circles were temples, and the old gods were jealous gods.'

They drove on in silence until Stewart pulled up. They left the car and walked along a narrow road which bent away to where Long Meg, the outlier, presided over the circle of stones which were referred to as her daughters, or, as another legend has it, her lovers.

'No,' said Stewart, referring to the legends, 'neither of those is the story I heard. This is a coven of witches turned into stone by a saint who couldn't abide their goings-on. It's the most likely bit of folklore, as a matter of fact, because there would have been magic practised in these stone circles, with ritual dances and, no doubt, fertility rites. Let's walk in by those stones which mark the entrance and go straight across the circle and take a look at Long Meg herself. They say, you know, that most of these circles were erected near water because the stones need to drink. You saw that we had to cross the river back there, so this circle seems to conform.'

Long Meg's Daughters formed a flattened circle of very considerable size. Stewart, pacing it, deduced that it was at least one hundred feet across at its widest, and something under ninety at the flattened sides of the oval. Long Meg herself, set outside the circle, which had been built on a slope up from the river, had two surprises for Capella. Because the builders had decided that the outlier must be the tallest of the stones, it was geologically unlike the others. The rest, some standing, some toppled, were boulders of a type of granite, the

immediately local stone. Many of them weighed several tons, but none of them had been tall enough to satisfy the builders, so Meg was a pointed pillar of red sandstone and could be seen from a point at which, owing to the slope of the ground, the rest of the stones, even the tallest uprights, were not visible.

‘Whatever you do, don’t break a piece off her,’ said Stewart, as they walked round Long Meg. ‘If you do, she will bleed, or so the story goes.’

‘Somebody at some time has marked her, anyway. Are those magic symbols?’ asked Capella. There were three sets of maze-like circles cut on the great pillar. She traced them with her forefinger.

‘Probably evidence of sun worship,’ replied Stewart. ‘There are lots of stones in the Britain Isles with cup and ring markings, mostly on passage graves, and there are chevron markings which pre-date the Norman churches and castles by about three thousand or more years. I’ve seen some marvellous prehistoric sculptures — well, bas-reliefs, I suppose — in Scotland, and there are some in Ireland I want to see.’

‘I didn’t know you had a serious interest in this sort of thing. You said you only came for the ride.’

‘Oh, I’m doing a thesis, you know. That’s why — well, it’s one reason — I wanted to visit Long Meg on our own, without the others all milling and clacking around. Tell me some more about your poltergeist.’

‘There isn’t any more to tell. You tell me more about Dame Beatrice. Which of us do you think she has been asked to study? — not that I believe a word of it.’

‘Honestly, I haven’t a clue. She’s an expert criminologist as well as a psychiatrist, you know. Solves mysterious murders and all that sort of thing.’

‘She sounds absolutely terrifying.’

‘Oh, I think she is. Those sharp black eyes see everything. That beaky little mouth tells nothing. Yes, she’s terrifying all right, so if you’re thinking of murdering Clarissa or the beautiful stone-goddess Catherine, as you probably will be before this trip is over, forget it.’

‘Please don’t call her a stone-goddess! Not here, in front of Long Meg! You said that Dame Beatrice is a criminologist, but murder is only one crime among many.’

‘It happens to be her speciality, that’s all.’ He took a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket and made a careful sketch of Long Meg and her markings. Then he dotted in the circle of stones, sketched one or two of them, annotated the drawings, put away notebook and pencil and looked at his watch.

‘Time to be shifting,’ he said, ‘or they will all have finished breakfast before we get back.’

When they had left the circle by passing again between the double stones which marked the entrance, Capella looked back.

‘Better not do that,’ said Stewart. ‘You might be turned into a pillar of salt or, rather, a pillar of granite. Except for Long Meg, the Stones are igneous rocks.’

‘I don’t like your jokes,’ she said.

He laughed and said, as they walked on: ‘I am hoping it would be salt, and neither sandstone nor granite.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘Salt dissolves,’ he said, looking straight in front of him. It was her turn to laugh.

‘Sorry, but I’m not in melting mood,’ she said. This time she halted, turned completely round and took a long look at the stones. They stood menacing and dark against the early-morning sky, stark, grim guardians of a once-hallowed place, with Long Meg, the outlier, conspicuous because of her greater height and what Capella, thought of as her loneliness. As they walked towards the car, she was reminded of that other outlier, the misshapen, disappointed king unable to see Long Compton because of an intervening mound. Plotted against by five traitorous knights huddled together on the other side of a field of barley, he seemed indeed a lonely figure.

‘A penny for them,’ said Stewart. ‘Where have you gone?’

‘To the Oxford-Worcester border,’ she replied. ‘I’ll race you to the car.’

As they were driving back to the hotel, she said: ‘I shall go to Long Meg again with the others after breakfast.’

‘Shall you? But why? We’ve seen what there is to be seen. You won’t like it half as much next time. Catherine will look superior and talk about the *Golden Bough* and Clarissa will photograph every single stone and give it some fancy name out of Beatrix Potter or a folk song.’ He put on a falsetto voice. ‘Oh, do look! Isn’t this one exactly like the frog who would a-wooing go? I shall call him Anthony Rowley. Now we must find him a Mistress Mouse and an Uncle Rat.’ He resumed his normal tones. ‘They’ll drive you mad, my dear. Far better to give them a miss and come to Keswick with me.’

‘If they drive me mad, then Dame Beatrice will not have joined the party in vain,’ said Capella composedly. ‘It’s anti-social to duck out of their activities.’

Chapter 3

CASTLERIGG

‘It required the careful and charitable hands of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity.’

Sir Thomas Browne



Are you really going off to Keswick on your own?' asked Capella, joining Stewart on the steps of the hotel when breakfast was over.

'Are you really going to waste your morning going to see Long Meg with the others instead of coming with me to Keswick?' he enquired. 'I did say I'd give you lunch, you know.'

'I think you are being not only unfriendly but rather rude,' she said by way of answer. 'We came as a party and we ought to stick together as a party. Besides, you probably know more about stone circles than any of us, so you ought to benefit us by talking to us about them instead of leaving us to play useless guessing games.'

'Owen knows as much as I do, I daresay. Dog his footsteps and drink in his winged words. Anyway, I'll be a good boy after this, but I really must take a look at the Castlerigg circle on my own. I have my thesis to think about.'

'Then it's a good thing I'm not coming with you.'

'You see, Castlerigg holds a mystery,' he said, ignoring this.

'You won't tempt me by telling romantic lies,' said Capella.

'No, really, it isn't a lie. There *is* a mystery and I want to solve it.'

'What is it, then?'

'You'll know when you get there. Well, I shall miss my bus if I don't leave now. Sure you won't change your mind?'

'Quite sure. I have a few manners, you see. Besides, people know we went off together before breakfast. They were out on the terrace when we got back.'

'What of it? Sorry, but I must fly. Be seeing you!'

'But not again this morning,' thought Capella. She turned to go back into the hotel and almost bumped into Catherine.

'So where is Stewart off to now? asked Catherine. 'We are almost ready to start.'

'He isn't coming with us.'

'Oh? Oh, I see. Well, then, I think it would be better if you had my seat in the car. It will be a change for both of us if I sit at the back. The nuns are going in Lionel's car this time.'

'Well, as I know the way, that sounds a good idea. I can give Professor Owen the route,' said Capella, who did not intend to be ruled by the older woman. When the party had left the cars at Little Salkeld she walked quickly away from

Owen and Catherine and, avoiding Clarissa, who had left Lionel on his own to lock up their car, she received a slight smile from Sister Veronica and joined the two nuns.

The three of them made a solemn perambulation of the stone circle without a word being spoken until Sister Pascal said, 'We saw you come back this morning. Did you have a pleasant walk?'

'It was a drive as well as a walk. Stewart and I came here, as a matter of fact. He wanted to see these stones before he went off to Keswick, so to go before breakfast was his only chance. Shall we go and pay our respects to Long Meg?' She told the nuns the three legends she had heard. In return Capella learned that their convent was not far from Exeter, that the Order was that of St. Endellion (Capella had never heard of it, but, of course, made no mention of the fact), that Veronica taught history at a Catholic High School for girls and had been given permission to join the tour if her application was accepted by Owen, and that Pascal was her prioress and had come 'to keep her company'. Capella translated this as come 'to keep an eye on her', but decided that she might have been mistaken in this surmise. It was impossible to imagine the younger nun stepping out of line in things spiritual, temporal, or, in fact, taking any direction but the right one.

Both nuns were then full of speculation, appreciation and intelligent questions regarding the stones, their origin, their purpose and the probable date of their erection, and Capella enjoyed walking round with them.

When they returned to Owen's car there was another minor shuffling round of seats and she was asked to take her place behind Lionel again. Clarissa said, as they began their drive back to the hotel for lunch, 'I saw you got stuck with the nuns.'

'Far from it!' Capella protested. 'I joined them deliberately. The young one teaches history and I read history in College, so we had a lot in common and there was plenty to talk about. Actually, I don't believe I ever spoke to a nun before. I've always been rather in awe of them and I'm not a Catholic, anyway, so I've never been in contact with a convent or a convent school. Besides, they seem ever so much more approachable now that they grow their hair and can show a bit of it on their foreheads. Their habit is simpler, too, and much less austere than it used to be.'

'I think it's rather a pity. It makes them look like everybody else. They don't seem any different from, well, nurses and so forth, do they, especially in that heavenly shade of blue.'

‘They do to me. Anyway, they’re very nice. They belong to the Order of St. Endellion, they tell me.’

‘Oh, well, they have spiritual qualities, no doubt, which are denied to the likes of us,’ said Clarissa, ignoring Capella’s comments.

‘Not *denied* to us. We could have them if we strove for them,’ said Lionel, laughing, ‘*I* could, anyway.’

‘Oh, I doubt that. There is all that dedication, you know, and their vows — although, mind you, I insisted upon retaining the obedience bit in our marriage service, didn’t I?’

‘Did you? — That seems a strange place to put up a ring of stones. It must have been the deuce of a job on a slope like that.’ Lionel had been quick to change the subject, Capella thought. She wondered whether Clarissa was thinking wistfully about a marriage which did not exist.

‘It’s all to do with astrology, darling,’ said Clarissa, responding to Lionel’s remarks.

‘No, not astrology, astronomy,’ said Capella. ‘When I was a child my father told us all about it. Various stars are in alignment with various stones at the equinoxes and at other special times. Stewart told me this morning that the Long Meg circle is related to the sun and that the religious rites may have taken place in spring and autumn or even in mid-winter, and that the spirals and rings carved on the outlier may be representations of the sun and have some connection with life and death.’

‘Oh, the alignments are probably quite accidental. Anyhow, let’s hope it isn’t death, so far as we’re concerned,’ said Lionel, ‘although one does become a little superstitious when one thinks of a certain ancient lady and her secretary who have joined our party.’

‘Stewart thinks...’ began Capella, and then thought better of it.

‘Thinks what?’ asked Clarissa.

‘Oh, nothing.’

‘You shouldn’t begin a sentence that you don’t intend to finish.’

‘I’ll finish it for her,’ said Lionel. ‘Stewart thinks that one of us is suspected of being a bit short of some of his or her marbles and may be dangerous. Stewart thinks Dame Beatrice has come along in her official capacity to spot the dotty one, that’s all. He was talking to me about it.’

‘Oh, darling, what a frightening idea! Do you mean we’ve got somebody with us who could be a homicidal maniac? I think I’d like to go home!’

‘*I* think Stewart is talking rot, my dear.’

‘Well, it isn’t very reassuring rot, is it? I mean it’s all too likely that there is some truth in it. After all, why should Dame Beatrice take any interest in stone circles?’

‘Well, why do the rest of us take any interest in them? I’ll tell you. They are interesting objects in themselves and they make a good excuse for a holiday. What more does anybody want?’

‘What I *don’t* want is to travel to remote places with a murderous lunatic. I shall spend my time keeping an eye on everybody and wondering which of us it is.’

‘It’s probably only a leg-pull on Stewart’s part. It’s very irresponsible of him to put such a story about, but I’m positive there’s nothing in it.’

‘Well, I hope you’re right, but I shan’t have another easy moment. We’re going on to the island of Arran after we’ve seen the Castlerigg stones, you know, and there was a horrid murder committed up on Goatfell. It was a very treacherous affair and only for the sake of a few pounds, I believe.’

‘You shouldn’t read these horror stories if they distress you.’

‘I don’t read horror stories. I was reading up about Arran, as I knew we were going there, and the account was in the book.’

‘What did it say?’ asked Capella. ‘I mean, what happened exactly?’

‘Oh, well, these two young men, a Scot named John Watson Laurie and an English tourist called Edwin Rose, met on the boat which went down the Clyde in the July of 1889. Both of them boarded the boat at Rothesay and crossed to Arran and seem to have been complete strangers to one another until they got into conversation on board.’

‘I thought Rose was a Scottish surname,’ said Lionel, ‘but you say he was an Englishman.’

‘Well, Edwin isn’t Scottish. It’s pure Anglo-Saxon. Anyway Rose can be a Jewish name, too. I know some people —’

‘Sorry! Do go on, if Capella wants to hear the story and you want to tell it,’ said Lionel, speaking with some impatience.

‘Yes, well, I’ll cut it short because we shall soon be back at the hotel and have to join the others. Anyway, the passengers landed at Brodick and Laurie started off by giving a false name, so it looks as though he meant mischief from the very beginning. He told Rose his name was Annandale.’

‘Considering that he murdered Rose — at least, I suppose that is what you are going to tell us,’ said Capella, ‘how did that become known?’

‘Oh, the two men were together for several days and took holiday lodgings in

the same house. They went back to Rothesay and returned to Arran later. To cut the story as short as I can, they climbed Goatfell and from that day Rose disappeared. At the end of the holiday his brother was to meet him in London and got worried when he did not turn up. Finally the Scottish police organised a search of Goatfell and, after a lot of trouble and having to contend with mist and other hazards, they found Rose's body in a deep gully where every attempt seemed to have been made to cover it up and hide it.'

Two things surprised Capella about the telling of this story. Clarissa's dry, factual narrating of it was a very long way from the *Frog that would a-wooing go* whimsy which Stewart had attributed to her. Moreover, the tale itself appeared to have interested her sufficiently for her to remember the names of both the men, the *alias* of one of them, and even the month and year of the murder.

'How did the police know Laurie had done it?' she asked.

'To begin with, he left his holiday digs without paying his landlady. Previously he had told her that he had climbed Goatfell, which seems pretty stupid of him. Then there was a man named Aitken who had also been on the Rothesay steamer and who knew Annandale as Laurie. Laurie, under his own name, was already known to the police as a thief. Later on, Aitken met Laurie in Glasgow, an accidental encounter, and as the news of Rose's disappearance had been in all the papers and Aitken had seen the two of them together on the Arran trip, naturally Aitken mentioned it. This seems to have alarmed Laurie so much that he sold the tools of his trade and fled, another piece of stupid behaviour, for there was no suggestion at that point that Aitken entertained any suspicions of Laurie.'

'Had the police anything in particular to go on?'

'Oh, gracious, yes! Laurie seems to have been reckless to the point of insanity. He had even been seen on Arran, after Rose's disappearance, wearing some of Rose's clothes.'

Capella thought of Stewart's predictions again, and wondered how many others among the party shared his suspicions that Dame Beatrice was no seeker after stone circles, but was on the tour to look out for another prospective murderer who might turn out also to be 'reckless to the point of insanity'. She said nothing of this at the time, but felt slightly annoyed that Stewart had not made her the sole recipient of his views. She wondered to how many others, besides Lionel and herself, he had confided them.

When the party had returned to the hotel they found that Stewart had caught

a bus which brought him back in time for lunch. He joined Lionel, Clarissa and Capella at their table for four, and seemed in high spirits.

‘I’ve solved my problem,’ he said to Capella while the other two were studying the menu.

‘You mean you’ve decided which of us Dame Beatrice has singled out for special observation?’ Her mind was still on Clarissa’s story of the Arran murder.

‘That? Oh, heavens, I was only romancing. Forget it! I’m talking about the Castlerigg problem. I can’t wait to get you round there to see whether you agree with my conclusions. It’s a problem nobody has solved so far.’

‘You will have to share your views with the nuns.’

‘Eh? What are you talking about?’

‘I walked round the Long Meg stones with them this morning and I’m walking round Castlerigg with them this afternoon.’

‘Oh, hang it, no!’

‘Oh, damn it, yes.’

‘I don’t want to share my theories about Castlerigg with anybody but you.’

‘You couldn’t wait to share your theories about Dame Beatrice with Lionel. How many other people have you shared them with?’

‘He only shared them with me because I overheard that part of your conversation in the car and buttonholed him later on about it,’ said Lionel, who had finished ordering. ‘I have very acute hearing, so it will not be worth your while to talk secrets in the back of my car.’

‘I was not talking secrets,’ said Stewart. ‘I don’t suppose I am the only one to speculate upon the significance of the Dame’s presence among us. Bless me!’ he added, gazing down at his plate and touching Capella’s foot meaningfully under cover of the table. ‘There’s a nun in my soup!’

‘Two nuns,’ said Capella, prodding his ankle with the toe of her shoe, ‘and I’m walking round with them this afternoon, as I told you.’

The remains of about fifty feet of banking at the south and south-south-west of the almost perfect circle of stones at Carles, Castlerigg, indicated the previous existence of a henge. Stewart’s ‘mystery’ was immediately apparent. On the east side of the stones, most of which were still standing, although there were gaps here and there, was a strange little uneven rectangle of low stones which intruded into the circle and covered an area of some thirty by fifteen feet. The low stones of which it was formed were in marked contrast to the tallest stones in the circle. These were grouped mainly on the south side, and the largest stone of all was an immense mass of slate. The whole site was seen against the

rounded Derwent hills, especially of Threlkeld Knotts, which flung the tallest stones into high relief, but did nothing to bring the strange rectangle into prominence. It was noticeable only because it cut into the otherwise circular enclosure.

‘One of the finest circles in England,’ said Stewart, who, on the strength of having spent most of the morning at the site, had constituted himself showman and guide to the whole party. ‘The rectangle is particularly interesting. I judge it to have been the most sacred part of the enclosure, probably intended to be entered by nobody except a priest or a king. The same individual was probably both.’

‘I think it could have been the special area where the human sacrifices were carried out,’ said Lionel ghoulishly. ‘If you analysed the soil you would find that at some time it had been drenched in blood.’

‘I don’t think there is any evidence that human sacrifices *were* carried out,’ said Sister Pascal. ‘One devoutly hopes that there was nothing so dreadful.’

‘Quite,’ said Laura Gavin, ‘but, all the same, Sister, my husband and I had a very strange experience once in the Valley of Rocks at Lynton in North Devon. We had been for a long walk on a hot day in August and were coming back through the V. of R. when we came upon a very large, flat, quite smooth stone. Rather thankfully we took a seat on it, but almost immediately I felt such a sense of horror that I stood up and stepped away from the stone. Well, Dame Beatrice says I’m imaginative and perhaps I am, but my husband is a policeman and any imagination he may possess goes into solving crimes. Apart from that, he is the most practical, hard-headed man I know, and the furthest removed from the elves and fairies, so to speak. However, he got up and joined me and we walked on without a word to one another. In bed that night he said: ‘Do you think it was an altar stone? — human sacrifices under a Druid moon?’ I said I had felt most peculiar, but I had no idea why, and we left it at that, neither of us wanting to pursue the subject.’

‘That’s a very spooky story,’ said Clarissa. ‘There is an outcrop in the Valley of Rocks that’s called the Witches’ Cauldron. I wonder whether there is any connection? There could be some folk-memory, perhaps, of evil deeds.’

‘The stones and boulders in the Valley of Rocks are natural formations which have not been handled by man,’ said Catherine in her usual repressive tones. ‘As for Stewart’s enclosure which he chooses to regard as such a mystery, it reminds me of nothing so much as a sheepfold.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Owen, ‘there is one sheepfold we must all come to, and that

is rectangular, too. Human sacrifices? That applies to all of us in the end.'

'Are you not coming to inspect the little enclosure?' said Sister Veronica, pausing and looking back at Capella, who was standing stock-still as the others followed Stewart.

'No,' she replied. 'There is somebody lying dead in it.'

Sister Pascal, who had paused beside the younger nun, came back and said, 'Oh, no, Miss Babbacombe-Starr. I can see clearly between the stones of the little enclosure. I am certain there is nobody inside it and, even if there were, he would not be dead.'

Capella mastered her moment of panic, laughed and relaxed.

'Of course not,' she said. 'Professor Owen's remarks were rather macabre, that's all. Sorry to be so fanciful.'

'This is one of the true Sun Circles,' Stewart was saying as they joined him. 'The sun rises directly over Threlkeld Knotts at the equinoxes, that is to say, when the sun crosses the equator on about March 20 and September 22 or 23. These were especially sacred times to the ancient peoples, because there is some sort of magic abroad when day and night are of equal length. One almost feels it oneself.'

As with the Long Meg circle, Castlerigg had a definite entrance between portal stones, but whereas that of Long Meg was on the south-west side with the outlier herself acting as a pointer to it, here the entrance pillars (two enormous blocks) were on the north side, over against the hills. Capella and the nuns walked out through the portals, looked at the surroundings which made a natural amphitheatre, and then concluded their peregrination of the stone circle with the others. There was not much more to see.

'I believe these monuments are difficult to date,' said Sister Pascal, 'as so few artefacts have been excavated.'

'Burl puts the two circles we have seen as of probable Neolithic date,' said Sister Veronica. 'They are extremely large, have well-marked entrances and consist of a very large number of stones. The small rectangle is an unusual feature, I believe, but whether Mr Stewart's explanation is the right one it is not possible to judge.'

'I really thought I saw someone lying there,' said Capella, who had recovered completely from her fright, 'but why I should have concluded that it was a dead body I cannot imagine.'

'Oh, the stones cast strange shadows when the sun is beginning to decline; that is to say, once it is past the meridian,' said Sister Veronica, in the easy,

comforting tone which she would have used to a frightened child at her school, thought the amused and now tranquil Capella. She laughed and agreed and was about to change the subject when Sister Veronica added, 'There is something very strange about stone circles, all the same. I have been deluded, too.'

'What do you mean, Sister?' demanded Pascal, stiffening her already uncompromising back and halting in her tracks to look severely at the younger nun. 'It does not do to become fanciful.'

'No, indeed, Sister,' Veronica meekly agreed, 'and, of course, we are a large party. There are nine of us, even when Mr Stewart is not here, and there are ten of us here this afternoon because he is present.'

'What are you trying to say?' Sister Pascal relaxed a little and looked more kindly upon the young nun.

'Only that at the Long Meg circle and also here I have received the impression that we were — that we had been joined by an extra member. This morning I thought I counted ten of us, and at this place I thought, when we walked over to the little enclosure, that we numbered eleven,' confessed Veronica, looking down at her stout black shoes.

'Oh, you are a little confused because Mr Stewart is such a bird of passage,' said Sister Pascal. 'He is with us one minute and absent the next or, in this case, *vice versa*.' She spoke firmly and Sister Veronica replied, with the same meekness of demeanour and utterance,

'Thank you, Sister. Yes, that would account for it, of course. How silly of me not to have thought of it for myself.'

Capella, who was trying to quell a resurgence of her own former panic, received a strong impression that Sister Veronica found the explanation anything but satisfactory. Laura, who, with Dame Beatrice, had joined Capella and the nuns, said as lightly as she could, 'Oh, well, we can't expect to have the sites strictly to ourselves. They are public property, after all, so an odd bod is bound to pop up in the party every now and again.'

Going back in the car with Stewart, Capella said to him, 'Would you call Sister Veronica a fanciful person?'

'Fanciful? In what way?'

'Seeing things which aren't there.'

'Well, those women lead such an unnatural sort of life that I wouldn't be surprised at anything they might see.'

'Sometimes I wonder whether it isn't the best kind of life, the one they lead.'

'Oh, come, now! This is morbid. Snap out of it. What's the matter with you?'

‘That enclosed rectangle of yours —’

‘What about it?’

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’

‘Most people do, whether they admit it or not. You dare the most didactic sceptic to spend a night alone in a haunted house and see how he reacts!’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘Why did you ask it?’

‘Because there is something — oh, never mind!’

‘But I do mind. Out with it.’

‘I suppose your place of sacrifice *was* empty until one of our people walked inside and lay down in it?’

‘Nobody did that.’ He put his hand over hers. ‘You’re suffering from a touch of the sun, my dear.’

‘There hasn’t been enough sun for that.’

‘Look, you’re an imaginative sort of young thing and these stone circles can have a curious effect on some people.’

‘They have on me,’ said Clarissa from the front seat. ‘I call them extremely frightening, especially when Lionel talks about blood and human sacrifices, and Professor Owen says rectangles only remind him of coffins and cemeteries.’

This put an end to conversation and the journey, in any case, was a short one. When they got back to Penrith, Stewart invited Capella to have tea with him in a small café which made its own cakes. She accepted and over the meal she said, ‘May I talk seriously to you?’

‘I wish you would,’ he replied, without a trace of flippancy. ‘I take it that you want to continue the conversation which Clarissa interrupted. I don’t wonder she’s nervous.’

‘You think these stone circles have the same effect on her as they do on me and, I think, on Sister Veronica?’

‘I wasn’t referring to stone circles, but to the curious relationship between Clarissa and Lionel. That’s why she’s nervous.’

‘There isn’t anything curious about the relationship between a husband and wife, especially when they are young and very fond of one another.’

‘How do you know they’re a married couple?’

‘Clarissa said she had insisted upon keeping the “obey” clause in their wedding service.’

‘And Lionel immediately and most ungallantly changed the subject, I’ll bet.’

‘Well, yes, he did. I was rather surprised. Tell me what you think about

them.'

'I am not a pupil in the school for scandal, therefore I don't think anything at all about them if I can help it. Look, you don't really want to talk about Lionel and Clarissa. What *do* you want to talk about?'

'Rectangles. I've always had a dread of them since I was ten and was taken to see somebody's grandmother in her coffin. I dream about them.'

'Bad luck, but you're a big girl now. Snap out of it.'

'I can't. I'm sure I saw somebody lying in that rectangle of yours.'

'Of course you didn't. You're wildly suggestible, that's all. You heard that ass Lionel talking about blood and human sacrifices and that was enough to start your imagination going.'

'That's all very well about me, but what about Sister Veronica? She says that when you are not with us the party still numbers ten, and when you *are* with us it numbers eleven.'

'Dear, dear! It strikes me that she ought to consult Dame Beatrice professionally.'

Chapter 4

THE TRUTH GAME

‘Now speak to me, blankets, and speak to me, bed
And speak, thou sheet, enchanted web
And speak, my brown sword that willna lee...’

Border Ballad — *Cospatrick*



Our group' said Dame Beatrice to Laura as they drove back to the hotel, 'appears to have fused. I foresee a gathering in the lounge after dinner tonight with polite, insincere conversation, a projection of the ego which persists in all of us and possibly, if young Mr Stewart is allowed by Miss Catherine to organise it, some small degree of the conviviality induced by the introduction of spiritous liquors into the human interior.'

'A feast of reason and a flow of song, if not of soul,' said Laura. 'Oh, well, God bless the gregarious instinct! You mentioned Stewart, though. He strikes me as a bit of a loner. Have you put him on your list?'

'What list? As for his preferring his own company at times to that of the rest of us, I understand that he is working on a thesis and is impatient of too many distractions while we are what the film people call "on location".'

'He's found one distraction, anyway, or my eyes and instincts deceive me.'

'You refer to the attraction Miss Babbacombe-Starr appears to have for him, no doubt. I say "appears" because I think perhaps there is a bigger fish than the young Capella in his pond.'

'I spotted him playing footsy-footsy with her under cover of the table.'

'I, too, but I fancy she responded with a firm *ultra licitum*.'

'Good for her. Is *she* on your list? She's an odd young bod, I feel. She's what those two old dears in the Gary Cooper film would call pixylated.'

'But, according to them, everybody of their acquaintance was pixylated.'

'Do I discern a back-handed compliment in that trenchant observation?'

'If the cap fits...'

'Anyway, that kid isn't normal. You must have noticed it.'

'It is not abnormal to be in a state of indecision tinged with alarm.'

'Why should she be in such a state?'

'I don't know. Maybe she has confided in the nuns.'

'She might do worse, although Sister Pascal strikes me as a pretty tough egg. Honestly, though, *haven't* you got a little list?'

'Of people on this tour who are in need of a psychiatrist? Certainly not. I am here on holiday.'

'Yes, I know, but if there isn't something behind it I can't make out why *I* was invited to come with you. *You* may have been invited to lend what the housemaid called 'an air of respectability', you being who and what you are and

so shedding lustre on any gathering, and all that, but why me? And I know I was included, because I saw Owen's letter and I typed the answer. I suppose I am here to take down your case notes, that's all.'

'You are far too modest. As the wife of an Assistant Commissioner — '

'Yes, that's what I mean. As the wife of an Assistant Commissioner I don't have any place in a gathering of this kind; as your secretary, a taker of notes, a recipient of confidences with regard to case histories, a bodyguard if necessary when the patients turn violent, I might have my uses, however slight, but none of that connects up with this trip unless...'

'As usual, you are allowing your imagination to run away with you. Why should you not have been invited for the mere pleasure that your company gives me?'

'All right. I still think there's more behind it than that. All the others answered an advertisement. Why should *we* have been singled out for an invitation? There *must* be something behind it.'

'I am sure that Professor Owen's cousin, Miss Catherine, was invited.'

'Members of a family don't count. They oil themselves in, whether they're invited or not, if the binge seems geared to their advantage.'

'I am sure that cannot apply to members of your own family.'

'Oh, the Menzies clan is different. *Geal is Dearg a suas!* Up with the White and Red! We've even got a different kind of tartan from everybody else.'

'So much independence might smack of arrogance to the Sassenach mind.'

'Be that as it may, I'm not the only member of this gathering who thinks that a-hunting you will go.'

'You are utterly mistaken. I met Professor Owen once when I addressed the faculty of law at his University. The invitation stemmed from that encounter, I am certain.'

'Well, nobody else thinks so, and that doesn't account for *my* inclusion. Hasn't he dropped any hints?'

'Not so far as I am aware.'

'Oh, well, it's early days yet. I expect he's waiting until you've had a chance to sum people up.'

'I should not dream of doing such a thing on the lines which you are suggesting, and I am not going to indulge in any wild speculations merely for your amusement.'

'Good heavens, of course not! I must say, though, that young Capella's nerves and Stewart's exclusiveness in sneaking off the way he did this morning,

coupled with that aggressive, good-looking Catherine woman, let alone Lionel and Clarissa having those curiously linked, light-opera names — well, dash it all, you must admit that Owen's invitation to you and me does give food for thought.'

'I am glad you have something other than stone circles to occupy your mind.'

'Well, so far as I am concerned, they lack the excitement of a border war or the glamour of an evening at the ballet, but let that pass. I'll tell you another thing, though. I think Stewart or one of the others has been putting it about that the circles on Arran are a lot less interesting than some on the mainland of Argyll and Clarissa says that a particularly beastly murder took place on the island towards the end of last century. She contends that Goatfell, that great mountain, got itself a bad name as a result. Personally, I think it's a lot of hooey. Arran is a lovely island and holiday-makers who go there every year don't give a hoot for the story of the one murder which took place there.'

'And why should they? One swallow does not make a summer and, if you will forgive a slight play upon words, neither does one swallow make a drunkard, or one swallow make a sick man whole. I wonder what ulterior motive Mr Stewart has in not wishing to visit the island?'

'He knows of something on the mainland which he needs for his thesis and there isn't time to visit that and Arran, too, because of the hotel bookings. That's my guess.'

'Most reasonably argued, and I shall be surprised if his point of view does not sway others. All the same, as I understand it, our itinerary does not include an ascent of Goatfell. The remains we are to visit form a complex of stone circles and cairns on the west side of the island, the part known as Machrie Moor. I hope the weather will remain clement, although I believe rain is forecast. The spot, from what I remember of it when I went there years ago, is exposed and without any shelter in sight. To a Highlander, such as yourself, to be wet and chilly means nothing, but both Catherine and Clarissa appear to be more vulnerable, and as we are to return to Ardrossan from Arran, there can be no question of a hot bath and a change of clothing until after we have left the ferryboat and are back in the hotel.'

After dinner the evening did turn wet and this appeared to dampen the spirits of the party. Most seemed lethargic, Catherine more prim, disdainful and withdrawn than ever, and Clarissa looking tired and depressed. The party, except for the nuns, who had gone to their rooms to write letters and postcards, gathered

in a circle around a table in the lounge and Owen produced playing-cards and suggested bridge, but nobody wanted to play.

The hotel television set — there were no sets in the bedrooms — had been put out of order by a meddlesome guest and there was no radio set, so there were not even these forms of entertainment to fall back on.

Conversation soon flagged. Lionel lit cigarettes for himself and Clarissa, and Stewart pushed back his chair and said he thought he would go and put some custom in the barman's way, but Catherine picked up her formidable pince-nez which were dangling on a long gold chain, put them on and gazed at him severely.

'I thought you did that before dinner,' she said. 'Have you no concern for your liver?'

'Devil a bit, but I defer to your wishes. What, then, are we all going to do to pass the evening? Does anybody know any good stories?'

'Not the kind *you* would favour,' said Catherine.

('Is this her way of flirting with him?' thought Laura.)

'Oh, I don't know about that,' he said, smiling at her. 'Like you, I favour great literature and you must admit that one or two of Chaucer's pilgrims got a bit near the bone, and certain of Sheherazade's life-saving yarns were pretty warm stuff if you read the unexpurgated version. Then there's Boccaccio, not to mention a music-hall song of before my time. I believe it was sung by a very fetching young woman impersonating a naval officer, and one line was: And you can guess what tales they'd be "twixt a captain and a middy in the King's Navee." I trust I quote correctly.'

'Stop being idiotic!'

'Well, it was an idiotic song, unless the relationship between the captain and the midshipman was one which I'm sure the regulations would never permit.'

'Don't be obscene!'

'Dear me! There's no pleasing you tonight! What *may* I say, please, Auntie Kate? Shall I quote Petruchio to gain your favour? "That — hearing of her beauty and her wit, her affability and bashful modesty, her wondrous qualities and mild behaviour — "

Catherine got up.

'I shall go to my room,' she said. 'You are intolerable tonight.'

('I wonder if there *is* something between them?' thought Laura).

'No, don't go,' said Owen. 'I've got an idea. Why don't we play the Truth Game?'

‘Because nobody will tell the truth,’ said Lionel.

‘If it involves inventing answers to embarrassing questions, I’m not going to play,’ said Capella. She began to walk towards the door and, at this, Catherine sat down again. Stewart got up with the intention of following Capella, but Catherine took firm hold of his sleeve and said,

‘Oh, do stop pursuing that poor girl!’

Capella paused in the doorway and then came back.

‘All right,’ she said defiantly. ‘Perhaps he *is* pursuing me, but I’m capable of looking after myself. One is capable of more than that after three years at Oxford with the ratio of the sexes what it is at that abode of learning. Bring on your Truth Game. I expect Dame Beatrice will know whether that’s what it will turn out to be.’

‘I suggest that we write down our answers,’ said Owen, ‘and give them to Dame Beatrice so that she can act as judge, if she will be so good. I am prepared to offer a small prize for the most ingenious reply, whether it is truthful or not, and no answers will be read aloud unless people agree.’

‘It is certainly a version of the game which is new to me,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Before we begin,’ said Laura, ‘may I ask a question? Are we to sign our answers?’

‘Oh, I think not. A single initial will do. We don’t want to give our illustrious judge too much of a lead, although some of us will not be able to help ourselves. People may use any initial of their first or their surname, as it pleases them.’

‘Comes another question,’ said Laura, ‘if you will not think me impertinent. Your own initials intrigue me very much. Would you have any objection to telling me what they stand for? This is only idle curiosity, I realise that, but Q. X. are so very unusual a combination that I can’t stop trying to work out what they stand for. The nearest I can come up with is Quentin Xavier. Am I on the right track?’

‘No,’ replied Owen with a smile. ‘My names are Questor Xenophon. At school I was known as Quexo, the O, of course, standing for Owen.’

‘So nobody bothered about the letter L,’ said Catherine, ‘or you could have been called Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god with the flint-tipped dart at the winter solstice.’

As though he had come prepared, Owen fished out a modern, flat briefcase from the shelf under the table and from it handed round sheets he tore from a writing-pad.

‘What, exactly, is the point at issue?’ went on Catherine, making a scribble or two on her paper to make certain that her ball-point worked. Before Owen, if he intended to do so, could answer, the nuns came in. Chairs were brought over from another table by Stewart and Lionel and the circle was enlarged to accommodate the Sisters. Sister Pascal said she hoped they were not intruding. They had hoped to go for a walk, but the rain prevented this. They were cordially invited to join in the game and were given paper and pencil.

‘Examinations usually have a time-limit,’ said Capella. ‘How long are we allowed?’

‘I don’t think we need set a time-limit,’ said Owen, ‘but perhaps we should keep in mind that the judge has to study nine sets of answers and she will not want to stay up all night.’

‘Oh,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘I can hardly judge and assess the papers tonight. Will not tomorrow evening do? If a prize is to be awarded I must not be forced into hasty conclusions.’

‘How sensible,’ said Catherine.

‘It sounds very official and cold-blooded,’ said Clarissa.

‘I still think it’s a silly game,’ said Capella, ‘but I suppose it will pass the time.’

‘I thought, though,’ said Stewart, ‘that in this game one was supposed to give oral answers so as to keep the party going.’

‘Not the way I play it,’ said Owen.

‘Obviously the judge herself can’t play, but am I to take part?’ asked Laura.

‘As you please, Mrs Gavin.’

‘Then what are you all going to think if Dame B. awards me the prize? — for I should like to play.’

‘That you deserved to win, of course,’ said Lionel.

‘Let’s get on with it,’ said Stewart. ‘I want a nightcap before they close the bar.’

‘You drink far too much for a boy of your age,’ said Catherine.

(‘Good Lord! The motherly touch!’ thought Laura.)

‘Yes, I shall have the stomach of an alderman by the time I’m thirty. How do you spell ipecacuanha? I need a purgative,’ said Stewart.

‘Get on with your truth-telling and don’t be disgusting, little boy.’

‘Great-aunt, I love you, and I *will* be good.’

‘Well, now, here are my questions,’ said Owen, ‘and I shall include myself in the competition unless the majority rules that I am ineligible.’

‘It depends upon your list of questions,’ said Lionel.

‘Well, here they are. First: why did you want to join this tour? Second: what would you have been doing otherwise? Third: what is your secret fear and how does it relate to your favourite superstition?’

‘He didn’t think of all *that* on the spur of the moment,’ muttered Stewart in Capella’s ear. ‘*Prenez-garde*, as Abbie would say.’ He scribbled busily and was the first to hand in his answers. The others took more time, but one by one the papers came in. Dame Beatrice gathered them up, said goodnight and, followed by Laura, went upstairs. She was only moderately interested in the collection of written answers. Some might be truthful, others not, but few, if any, she thought, were likely to contain the whole truth, and some of the answers to the second question would most likely contain lies, evasions and half-truths. She thought she might be able to sort these out, but she knew so little of her companions’ private lives that there was bound to be a considerable amount of guesswork in her conclusions.

She was interested that Owen had obviously come prepared for some game to be played which involved writing, since he had all the materials very much to hand, but this could merely be the provision made by the leader of the expedition against just such a long, wet evening as the party had experienced.

‘Well, bed will suit me tonight,’ said Laura, when they had reached the first-floor landing.

‘And me,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I’m sorry I can’t deal with these papers tonight, but it would not be fair to the contestants to do so. These days in the open air are conducive to sleep. Come in and help me to get out of this dress. I am too tired to be a contortionist tonight, and it requires that kind of personal activity to reach these back fastenings.’

As she said this, a group of the others passed her and Laura, said goodnight and went along the corridor. Mystified by the request for help which she knew was unnecessary, Laura followed Dame Beatrice to her room.

‘Why this thusness?’ asked Laura, switching on the light as she closed the door.

‘Oh, merely precautionary measures. There is bound to be somebody interested in somebody else’s answers, so I intend to keep open house for half an hour when I have dictated these writings to you and you have taken them down in shorthand. As I finish with each paper I shall mark your shorthand with an unobtrusive symbol and then we shall see what happens.’

‘Stewart’s initial is a plain S, of course. S for serpent, would you say? I

thought he was playing off Catherine against Capella this evening, didn't you?'

'May I dictate?'

'Oh, sorry. Fire away. Why, exactly, do we need two copies of these probably wildly untruthful screeds?'

'Time will show. If it does not, then I shall have wasted your time, that is all.'

'Those who pay for things have a right to waste them.'

'Not so, but very far otherwise, dear child. Nobody has a right to waste anything, not even his breath.'

The dictation was soon completed, each shorthand piece being marked with the required initial.

'Now what?' asked Laura.

'Now you put your shorthand into your handbag and keep it safely until I ask you to transcribe it or read it back to me. So now for bed. If anything happens, I will tell you all about it in the morning.'

'Look here, you're not taking any risks, are you? All this smacks of conspiracy.'

'No. A conspiracy involves more than one person. I think somebody's curiosity may outrun his or her discretion, that is all. Those questions, in my opinion, were loaded and, since the essence of the Truth Game is to cause laughter at the expense and to the embarrassment of at least one of the players, this method of asking for written answers which are not to be read aloud has the element of novelty about it, and there must be some reason for that.'

'Whose curiosity are we talking about?'

'Almost anybody's. I said that the party has fused. I am beginning to think that nothing could be further from the truth. Well, goodnight, and off you go.'

Having closed the door behind Laura, Dame Beatrice laid the papers on the bedside table, put on a dressing-gown, picked up sponge-bag and towel and, having put out the light, she left her door ajar and crossed the corridor to the nearest bathroom. She had bathed before dinner, so she merely turned on both taps, sat down on the bathroom stool and waited. After a while she turned off the taps, waited again and a quarter of an hour later she pulled out the plug, gave herself ten minutes more and then returned to her room.

As soon as she examined the papers she knew that somebody had taken advantage of the open door and had been into her room. There had been nine sheets and there were still nine sheets. Moreover, so far as she could remember, they were in the same order in the little pile as when she had left them. One of

them, however, no longer had her tiny, secret mark of identification on it.

Dame Beatrice read it and learned that the writer had joined the tour at the pressing invitation of her cousin, Professor Owen; that otherwise she would have been getting on with her next novel; that her secret fear was of spiders and that her favourite superstition was that horse-shoes hung the right way up brought good luck.

The first two answers were probably true enough, but anybody in the party could have guessed them. The rest of the answers were trite and might have applied to hundreds of women. In other words, nothing in the substituted paper gave any clue to the identity of the forger. As for the handwriting, it was very like the convent-school Continental hand of Sister Pascal, thought Dame Beatrice, making comparison with the paper marked P.

The nun was the very last person to have made the substitution, Dame Beatrice decided. The most likely candidate was Owen, who might have wanted to know why Catherine had accepted his invitation; although Stewart, out of a mixture of curiosity and mischief, was a possibility and so was Capella. There remained, apart from Sister Veronica and Laura, both of whom it would be ridiculous to suspect, Lionel and Clarissa, who were, as Laura would have put it, 'the dark horses of the outfit'. Dame Beatrice had her reasons for thinking that Laura might be right, so she put them on her mental list of suspects and picked up Stewart's contribution. As she had expected, Stewart had chosen flippancy as the better part of truth. He had written:

'I joined the tour as an alternative to joining the Foreign Legion. This answers questions one and two. My secret fear is that the goblins 'ull git me ef I don't watch out. My favourite superstition is that it is unlucky to fall over a black cat in a coal-cellar if its eyes are shut.'

Dame Beatrice exchanged her dressing-gown for her night attire and went to bed. In the morning she shredded all the papers into tiny pieces, mixed these well together, put the lot into the large envelope which Owen had provided — undoubtedly he had come prepared, she thought — screwed up the envelope and put it into the waste-paper basket. She told Laura what she had done.

'And anybody who can put *that* Humpty-Dumpty together again is better at jig-saw puzzles than I am,' she said as they went down to breakfast next morning. 'I shall depend upon your shorthand a little later on. Incidentally, I shall award the prize to Sister Pascal, whatever her entry is like. They will all expect to have the winning answers read aloud and hers will be the safest, in

every way, because nobody will be knowledgeable enough to attempt any reading-between-the-lines of a nun's disclosures.'

'Well, nobody is likely to quarrel with your choice, if that's the entry you choose,' said Laura. 'I wonder what today will bring forth, if anything? When shall you announce your verdict?'

'Not until this evening at the earliest, and it is more likely that I shall wait until we have been over to Arran. People may want to go to bed early tonight.'

Laura would have liked to know the reason for the destruction of the original documents, but was content to bide her time.

Chapter 5

DIVISION OF FORCES: (1) MACHRIE MOOR

‘Thy unmolested peace, unshared cave,
Possess as lord, not tenant of thy grave.’

William Basse



In the bustle of preparing for departure, the payment of bills, the tipping of hotel porters and the loading up of the cars, nobody mentioned the Truth Game, let alone asked any questions concerning Dame Beatrice's opinion of the entries.

There was to be a short stop for coffee at Carlisle, lunch would be taken at Dumfries and the party was booked in for the night at Ardrossan ready for the crossing to Brodick on Arran in the morning.

After lunch, at Owen's suggestion, there was to be a change-round of passengers, but, to begin with, the party travelled as on the first day. Stewart offered to take over the driving in order to give Lionel a chance to relax and enjoy the scenery, but Lionel, not too politely, refused to consider the proposition. He pointed out that the journey was not long enough and the scenery not exciting enough to warrant a change of drivers. Clarissa said that she preferred to be in the front seat ('for if you drove you would want Capella beside you, I suppose') and was accustomed to Lionel's driving and to navigating for him. Capella, without her opinion being called for, chimed in and said that she wanted to arrive in Ardrossan in one piece.

'What makes you think I'm not a safe driver?' demanded Stewart.

'You haven't had enough experience.'

'I've been a driver — and with a clean record, too, I'd have you know — for seven years.'

'Seven from twenty leaves thirteen, so don't tell lies.'

'What makes you think I'm only twenty?'

'You said you're writing a thesis.'

'Post-graduate. I'm twenty-six.'

'Honest?'

'Cross my heart. And now I'll let you into a little secret. No, on second thoughts, I don't think I will.'

'Perhaps you'd rather tell it to Catherine.'

'Hey, hey! Are you suffering from an attack of little green monsters?'

'Certainly not. She is a very beautiful woman and I wouldn't blame you.'

'“Too soothe and mild your lowland airs/For one whose hope is gone,”' said Stewart.

'Poor Stewart! Did she keep you at bay?'

‘Wait for it, or you won’t get the compliment you’re angling for. Ready? Well, this is it: “I’m thinking of a little tarn, Brown, very lone.” ’

‘I don’t call *that* a compliment.’ She released her hand from his and moved away from him. Stewart began to sing, very softly, ‘Ho-ro, my nut-brown maiden,’ but she remained aloof.

Lionel and Clarissa also appeared disinclined for conversation, and after lunch Lionel had Capella beside him with the nuns on the back seat. Owen took on Dame Beatrice, while Laura convoyed Clarissa, Stewart and Catherine — the last two, to Laura’s interested speculation, sharing the back seat while Clarissa sat next to her in the front.

The party put up at a hotel by the harbour and after dinner Stewart announced his own plans for the morrow. He regarded the stones on Machrie Moor, he said, as of less importance to his work than the much more interesting and complex sites round about the village of Kilmartin on the mainland. He proposed, therefore, to leave the party to make the crossing next morning to Brodick, arrange for his own transport, and meet the others again when they returned from Arran.

‘We’re spending another night here, anyway,’ he pointed out, ‘so I shan’t be upsetting any plans.’

‘The Kilmartin valley?’ said Owen. ‘I wonder whether that would appeal to anybody else?’

‘What is so special about it?’ asked Clarissa. Stewart produced maps, plans and photographs and soon had an interested audience. Clarissa looked at Lionel and said that it sounded very interesting, and that she would like to go.

‘Not without me,’ said Lionel. Owen asked whether anybody else would prefer Kilmartin to Arran. He himself would like to go, but there was the question of seats in the cars if the party were to divide up. Catherine thereupon opted for the new plan and so, to Laura’s surprise, did Dame Beatrice, who was immediately invited to travel in Owen’s car with himself and Catherine, unless Laura also wanted to go to Kilmartin.

This left the nuns, Capella and Laura herself to make up their minds. Sister Pascal said that she and Sister Veronica were prepared to fit in as the rest of the party dictated, but Laura thought she caught a pleading glance from the younger nun, who was clearly disappointed when she heard that Owen and Stewart had changed the original plan. The whole question was settled by Capella, who said that she had been looking forward to Arran and would make the crossing alone if everybody else was going to Kilmartin.

Laura caught Dame Beatrice's eye, made a slight gesture and received a nod which she was sure she could interpret correctly.

'Arran for me,' she said firmly, 'and that looks as though I've collected a car-load, then.'

'Oh, but — ' began Sister Pascal. Laura did not allow her to finish.

'I've been looking forward to Arran, too,' she said. 'I'll be only too glad of company. That's settled, then. We'll see the others off after breakfast tomorrow, and then I'll go out and buy things for a picnic lunch that we can eat in our fingers. We'll have a real day out tomorrow, just the four of us.'

She looked at Dame Beatrice again and received approval in the form of a ferocious leer. Later on, when there was an opportunity, Laura said.

'So you're going on the warpath tomorrow.' Dame Beatrice cackled.

'It is good of you to help me to separate the sheep from the goats,' she said.

'So there *is* something cooking,' said Laura. 'I knew it in my bones. Did something happen last night which you haven't told me?'

'You are jumping to conclusions.'

'Oh, oh! Who mentioned sheep and goats?'

'I believe I did.'

'So you've got the ship's company sorted out.'

'The Truth Game may have done that for me.'

'That Owen is a deep schemer. The rumours are right, then. You were asked to come along to vet somebody. I knew there was something behind that Truth Game. Owen made his own rules, didn't he? Did he ask you to — '

'He did not ask me to do anything except read the answers and adjudicate upon them.'

'Why did you make me take them down in shorthand?'

'Because I intended to conduct a little experiment and I wanted to make certain that I had a second means of access to the various answers.'

'You speak in riddles. What exactly happened last night?'

'I gave the opportunity to anybody who wished to avail himself or herself of it to enter my room and remove any of the papers which contained a too-revealing truth. Somebody did take such opportunity. Somebody removed Miss Catherine's answers and substituted another set.'

'Good Lord! Whoever it was took a pretty big risk. Suppose you had come back and found him at it!'

'The risk was negligible. He or she thought I was taking a bath.'

'Didn't you want to nip out and see who it was?'

‘I shall know in due course who it was.’

‘If I were to make a bet, my money would be on Owen.’

‘Why so?’

‘He engineered the game and I’m pretty sure he was the only one of us who knew Catherine before we all met in Exeter.’

‘But Owen need not have asked me to be the adjudicator. There was nothing to prevent him from collecting the papers and judging them for himself. After all, it is he who is awarding the prize.’

‘Perhaps he thought you would tackle the job with an unbiased mind. Is there any objection to my having another look through my shorthand?’

‘None whatever, provided that you wait until our Kilmartin party has moved off and that you do not let any of the others know what you are doing.’

While the two nuns remained at the hotel, Capella and Laura went shopping for picnic food and soft drinks, and a little later Laura drove on board the car ferry for Brodick. Her companions climbed out and mounted to the passenger deck, and at ten the ferry moved off.

The day was sunny and already warm; the crossing, sheltered by the mountains of Arran, was smooth, and at Brodick the disembarkation was simple and expeditious. It was far too early even for a picnic lunch, so Laura parked the car near the broad beach of the bay. They sat on the warm, soft sand and watched the summer visitors swimming, paddling, embarking on small boats or, like themselves, sitting and enjoying the sunshine and the scene, while, with a white cloud passing along its summit, the great blue mass of Goatfell rose to an almost symmetrical peak of granite.

When the nuns were ready to journey onwards (for Laura took it for granted that the outing was to be ruled by their wishes), the car took the coast road — the only road except for two which crossed the island between the mountains in long slants south-westwards — and discharged the party at Sannox Bay.

Here, having parked the car, they followed a footpath up the beautiful Glen Sannox. The path ran beside the river and, this time to the south of them, Goatfell still dominated the island, although there were other mountains almost as high. When they had returned to the car, Laura suggested that they should take an early lunch on the sands, as they wanted not only to visit the standing stones, but to complete the circuit of the island before they caught the return ferry to get back to Ardrossan.

The day was uneventful. Capella was silent most of the time and Laura wondered whether she was regretting her decision to join the present party

instead of going with Owen and Stewart and the others. Laura also wondered whether it was Dame Beatrice's inclusion in the other party which had been instrumental in causing Capella to choose Arran, or whether she had done so merely to spite Stewart.

‘Although why she should be afraid of Dame B.,’ she said to Sister Pascal when the two younger women had gone together to the edge of the water, ‘I really can't think.’

‘I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mrs Gavin. Is Dame Beatrice here to — is she here in her professional capacity?’

‘As a matter of fact, no, she isn't. She's on holiday, like the rest of us. She's almost bound to be interested, I suppose, in standing stones. She and I live in the Stone House. There's a tumbled-over monolith close by, from which the house takes its name. I'm a bit superstitious about the beastly thing. It's got a bad name and sometimes I wonder whether the stone — the locals call it the Stone of Sacrifice — isn't responsible for all the murders that follow us about.’

Sister Pascal began to purse her thin lips in mild deprecation of this statement, but decided to laugh instead.

‘But that is mere superstition, Mrs Gavin,’ she said. She returned to Laura's previous remark, which had been a thought spoken aloud. ‘Who is afraid of Dame Beatrice?’ she asked.

‘Oh, young Capella,’ said Laura. ‘The girl's cuckoo. I think she, well — ’
‘Yes?’

‘I think she opted to come with us when she knew that Dame B. was joining the other party. If you remember, she did not make up her mind until the last minute that she would come to Arran.’

‘That is true, but I still do not think it had anything to do with Dame Beatrice.’

‘You mean it was done to score off Stewart. Yes, I'd thought of that. Maybe you're right.’

‘But I have not mentioned Mr Stewart. What is more, Mrs Gavin, you may know something about Miss Babbacombe-Starr which I do not. I am not asking for your confidence, of course, but I thought there was something a little strange about that game we played last night. You say that Dame Beatrice is not here in her official capacity, but, if she were, I should see some significance in the fact that all our answers were handed over to her without anybody else being given so much as a glance at them.’

‘Look, Sister,’ said Laura earnestly, ‘would you mind not pursuing this line

of enquiry? If you go on, you may get me babbling all sorts of things which might be better left unsaid.'

'Yes,' said Sister Pascal, 'I know.' She smiled with great sweetness and added: 'I have not, in my time, been a Mistress of Novices for nothing. I will abandon the subject.'

The other two came back and the journey along the coast continued until the road left the coast and, with hills between it and the sea, ran inland up another part of the lovely Glen Sannox only to approach to sea again at Lochranza. Here it followed the exact shape of the island past bays and river-mouths, skirted the mountains which were sometimes not more than a mile inland, and all the time the sun shone on golden sands, seagulls swooped and glided against a blue sky and Capella, who had an untrained but pleasing soprano voice, sang, *O for the wings of a dove*.

Laura said, 'I'm not able to enjoy that song any more.' Sister Pascal, who was in the front seat beside her, asked why. 'Well, I was at a concert once, sitting next to a lively, rather naughty Jewess, and *Wings of a Dove* was sung by an extremely buxom prima donna. Out of the corner of my neighbour's mouth came, "It's not the wings of a dove but a jumbo jet that one needs to get her off the ground."

'Oh, dear!' said Capella, breaking off the song. 'That reminds me of Anton Dolin.'

'*He* didn't need the wings of a dove,' said Laura. 'He could get off the ground under his own impulsion.'

'I know. I was talking about rude but truthful remarks. He said of one ballerina that she was too fat and would have to get thinner if he had to lift her. "I am a dancer, not a piano-mover," he said.'

In this light-hearted mood the drive continued. The car rounded the north coast of the island and came southward down and west side. Laura pulled up in the village of Machrie and asked for directions, and the four women were soon walking across the moor alongside the little stream called Machrie Water.

The stone circles and the monoliths which also formed part of the impressive landscape appeared against the mountain masses of Ard Beinn and A'Chruach to the south, Beinn Tarsuinn to the north. There were the lesser but still significant masses behind Brodick, but still Goatfell, a giant even among giants, dominated the picture, rising behind Beinn Tarsuinn and Beinn Nuis like a god overshadowing his sons.

They passed a standing stone on their way shortly after leaving the coast, and

a ruined circle of stones on the other side of Machrie Water, but their objective was a collective of five circles about a mile into the desolation of the moor. These were very close together, but, except for one of them, they were so denuded of the original stones as to be, to the casual visitor, uninteresting.

The fifth circle, which was on the west side and was flanked by two chambered tombs, was still very nearly complete. It comprised two concentric circles of low-lying stones. A quarter of a mile to the west was a tall monolith and there were traces of cist graves within the five rings. 'Rings' was hardly an accurate description, since the stones formed ovals and not circles, as Sister Pascal pointed out.

The visitors ambled about, Laura and Sister Veronica together, Capella by herself until she tired and came and seated herself beside Sister Pascal on one of the flatter stones.

It was when the other two were coming back from looking at the remains of a cairn on the far side of the five circles that strange remarks were made.

Veronica said, 'Well, at any rate, it hasn't followed us here.'

'Followed us?' said Laura. 'What is it and why should it?'

Capella, pulling up a sprig of heather and twisting it between her fingers, said, 'I'd noticed it wasn't here. I've been keeping watch for it out of the corner of my eye.'

'Look,' said Laura, addressing Capella but not mentally excluding the young Sister Veronica from her strictures, 'this is a lonely, eerie, ancient and once sacred area, and spookery is both out-of-place and dangerous here. If you talk about *It* in the middle of this sort of set-up, you may produce *It*, and nobody wants that to happen. I personally am as superstitious as a Hottentot, so lay off, if you don't mind. I don't want to go into the screaming heebie-jeebies.'

'*Mea culpa*,' said Sister Veronica meekly. Capella tossed the heather-root into Laura's lap and said defiantly, '*It* or no *It*, I *did* see a dead body lying in the rectangle at Callanish.'

'We haven't been to Callanish,' said Laura.

'Rather a strange mistake for her to have made, don't you think?' said Laura to Dame Beatrice when they met before dinner that evening.'

'To confuse Castlerigg with Callanish? Both, perhaps, are unusual names to those of us who live in the south.'

'Yes, but why Callanish?'

'She has seen the name on our itinerary.'

'Oh, I suppose so, yes. How did you get on at Kilmartin today?'

‘We had an interesting if not an exciting time. Stewart, deprived of Miss Starr’s company, escorted Miss Catherine around the Kilmartin complex and nobody else.’

‘What about Lionel and Clarissa?’

‘They appear to have had an altercation before we left the hotel to visit the Kilmartin monuments.’

‘A domestic tiff, I suppose. I wonder how long they’ve been married?’

‘Or if they are married at all.’

‘Oh, a love nest of the modern sort, you think?’

‘I never think about other people’s business if I can help it, and then only if they are determined to confide in me.’

‘So they had a falling-out. I could hazard a guess at the cause of it. I bet they told each other what their answers were to the Truth Game questions, and one of them thought the other had been a bit too frank. May I consult my dossier and see what I can come up with? That Truth Game is dynamite.’

‘So long as you do not transcribe your shorthand until I give the word, you may consult it as much as you please. Before we left yesterday morning, I judged that the original documents would be better out of the way, as you know.’

‘Well, now that one set of answers has been pinched and another may have led to a show-down between Lionel and Clarissa, yes, indeed, very much better to let sleeping dogs lie. Rather interesting if there’s a bomb in one or more of those answers. Going back to Lionel and Clarissa, how did you all travel back, then?’

‘Lionel conveyed Catherine, Stewart and myself, while Clarissa drove with Owen. Stewart told us about his thesis. As for your remarking on the four sites which we are scheduled to visit on this tour, they represent the tip of the iceberg so far as his researches are concerned. He has seen the stone circles on Bodmin Moor, Stonehenge and Avebury, of course, and the more important Welsh sites. He has seen Arminghall in Norfolk, Arbour Low in Derbyshire, the circles of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Northumbria and now, on this tour, Long Meg, Castlerigg and the Kilmartin Valley. Later he plans to look at Shap, Mayburgh and Bleasdale — that will be on his return journey — and he will finish up at Stanton Drew in Somerset before travelling to Ireland and then to Brittany.’

‘Good Lord! One thing strikes me, though.’

‘I thought perhaps it might. You are wondering why, if he has visited all these stones either alone or with friends, he should have chosen to come on this very limited tour and with people who regard the thing as a jaunt rather than as a

scientific study of stone circles. I can only guess the answer. What did your party think of the Island of Arran as a whole?’

‘I can only tell you what *I* thought. My word, what a place for a holiday! I could have stayed six months so long as the weather held up. Lamlash Bay is beautiful. There are low green hills with the mountains behind them and lots of wild flowers on the hill-slopes round the bay. As for Glen Sannox, well, we must go and see it again some day. Besides, I want to climb Goatfell. You can do it the easy way or the hard way. I’d like to try both.’

When dinner was over, Stewart came up to where they were seated in the lounge.

‘May I?’ he said, indicating a vacant chair. ‘How did you enjoy Arran, Mrs Gavin?’

Laura gave a shortened version of her day and asked about his.

‘Oh, splendid. Most interesting,’ he replied. ‘I say, could you give me a few notes about the site on Machrie Moor? I’ve collected what the Sisters and Capella can tell me, but if I could have your views as well I’d be ever so grateful. I’m sure you noticed things which escaped the others. You seem, if I may say so, a highly intelligent and appreciative person and your impressions of a site I have not been able to see would mean a lot to me.’

‘Insinuating monster!’ said Laura. Dame Beatrice, with a vague excuse of wanting to go out and look at the sunset over the sea, left them to it. Laura, still astonished at what she had learned of Stewart’s activities in pursuit of material for his thesis, did her best for him. She gave a description of the setting of sea, moor, river and mountains, and then, hoping that she was not sounding too amateurish, a description of the site itself. He made notes while she talked of the flat moorland on which the stones had been erected, the way to them from the nearby coast and the mountain pass which must, she thought, connect them with the east side of the island.

‘There are five circles,’ she said, ‘but there’s very little left of four of them. The fifth is great. There are chambered tombs as well as the circles themselves. We didn’t visit all the tombs because it was too far to walk in the time we had to spare, but the stone circle which was almost complete was something a bit special.’

‘Two concentric circles, I believe.’

‘Yes, that’s right, with some low stones on the outer ring.’

He went on scribbling away, occasionally interjecting remarks about the finds of bones, flint arrowheads and food-vessels which had been made in other

circles during Bryce's excavations of 1862.

'Well, many thanks,' he said when she had told him all she could. 'Did you spot the outlier, a tall stone about a quarter of a mile away?'

'Yes, we had a look at it.'

'There are at least two more solitary standing stones, I believe, and the alignment of three of the circles is rather like the alignment of the cairns I saw in the valley today. Machrie Moor was undoubtedly a burial ground. Did you spot the hole in one of the outer ring stones by which the giant Fingal tethered his dog while he cooked himself some food in the inner circle?'

'Yes, we saw the hole, but didn't know the legend. I must tell the others.'

'You seem to have seen most of what there was. I suppose you didn't spot our vanishing lady?'

'How do you mean?'

'Oh, come, now! Don't tell me you haven't heard the rumours.'

'Such as?' asked Laura, who was not disposed to commit herself in any way except to give him an account of her day with the nuns and Capella. He laughed and said, although a trifle impatiently, that she could not have spent a whole day in the company of Sister Veronica without hearing something of the young nun's theories, but Laura still stalled.

'We talked of this and that, apart from admiring the stones and playing at guessing games about them,' she said. 'We certainly saw nothing of any vanishing lady. It sounds more like a conjuring trick than an addition to the party. Besides, what do *you* know about Sister Veronica's theories? So far as I have noticed, you've had nothing to do with her. The two of you haven't even travelled in the same car, have you?'

'Oh, young Capella has picked up some rumours and passed them on to me.'¹

'There have always been other visitors to the sites besides ourselves, you know,' said Laura, abandoning her defences.

'I think you are going cagey on me, my dear Mrs Gavin. Incidentally, couldn't it be Laura?'

'Oh, I answer to Hi, or to any loud cry. Well, now, fair's fair. I've told you all I can about our day on Arran. Suppose you tell me about Kilmartin and Temple Wood. It will all make something to put into my letters to my husband.'

'Fair's fair, as you say.' He turned back the pages of his scribbling tablet. 'I will follow the wise advice given to all story-tellers; that is to say, I shall begin at the beginning and go on to the end...'

'Leaving out no detail, however slight,' amended Laura, who thought it

would be interesting to compare his account with that of Dame Beatrice.

‘Right you are. Oh, by the way, you know we are booked in at Inverness after Fort William? Well, I understand it is because of the nuns. I shall be sorry to lose them, but they are not going to Stornoway. They are staying a couple of nights at a convent in Inverness, and will be taken to see the Clava stones by their friends. I’m going to Clava, too, but don’t spill that to anybody else. As you know, I rather like to do my stones on my own.’

‘Or else with Capella or, possibly, Catherine,’ said Laura.

‘Now, now! Anyway, I shan’t be crossing to Lewis. I’ve already seen Callanish and have made copious notes about it. Why don’t you and Dame Beatrice put in an extra night at Inverness and have a look at Clava? It’s fantastic.’

‘I know. You forget I’m in my own country. I’ve seen Clava more than once.’

‘And Dame Beatrice? Has she seen it or is she only interested in the hunting of the snark?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘No? You *do* surprise me, darling Laura!’

Chapter 6

DIVISION OF FORCES: (2) KILMARTIN VALLEY

‘Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb
stone, Arise.’

Habakkuk 2, v. 19 (Authorised Version)



A study of the road map, which was rendered necessary because there had been no previous plan to visit the Kilmartin valley, had suggested to Owen that it would be easier to go to Oban and find the objective from there, rather than to take the more complicated (as it appeared to him), although maybe shorter, route by turning off at Dalmally and running along the east side of Loch Awe.

Lionel, however, opted for the latter route, and he and his passengers arrived at the inn before the others. The sites to be visited were not all that far from the village, but the inn was the rendezvous for lunch when the two drivers had decided to follow different routes after leaving Dalmally.

When the party was reunited, it was apparent that some tempers had been ruffled. Owen's usual urbanity was slightly disturbed when he discovered that Lionel's party had reached Kilmartin before his, Stewart affected to be quietly furious because Capella had gone to Arran instead of staying with him, and Lionel and Clarissa had not resolved their quarrel and had not been on speaking terms during the whole of the journey. Only Dame Beatrice and Catherine appeared to have remained unperturbed, and to them was left the task of maintaining the semblance of an amicable conversation at lunch. After lunch Lionel put up the bonnet of his car and busied himself with tinkering with the engine while Clarissa walked on without speaking to him.

'Will you be able to manage all right, Dame Beatrice?' Owen asked solicitously. 'Of course there is no need to see it all. Lionel and I have agreed to leave the cars unlocked so that the ladies can return to them and take a rest when they have had enough. There is a certain amount of walking involved, but even if people do not manage to cover the whole complex I am sure that what they do see will prove of exceptional interest.'

'I hope that is so,' said Stewart, coming up, 'since I am the person who has brought you all here. You'd probably have enjoyed Arran far more, if only for the sake of the sea-trip and the island itself.'

'Here,' said Owen, taking no apparent notice of this, and speaking in an authoritative tone which surprised some of his hearers, 'we shall find a rich collection of cairns and decorated stones. As we proceed, Stewart and I will do our best to answer any questions.'

'I thought this was to be a holiday,' said Stewart, 'not a lecture tour. I want

my time for myself, not for instructing other people by providing information which they could well have looked up for themselves before we started.'

'Well, how curmudgeonly!' said Catherine. 'You were anxious enough to show off your knowledge at Castlerigg. Stop sulking because that unreliable young girl has defaulted, and show me round this obviously important site. You will find that my ignorance is surpassed only by my willingness to learn.'

'Let me start you off, my boy,' said Owen, marshalling the party. 'This site belongs more to the Bronze Age than to Neolithic Man, although you will find his traces here, as Stewart and I will point out. The first thing to realise is that, in the early Bronze Age, society had become what we may call individualised. Collective, tribal and social undertakings such as the formation of very large but comparatively simple stone circles and the long-barrow communal graves had given way to single burials and, besides that, it seems likely that wealth, in whatever form it was reckoned, had come into its own and a new social structure had resulted.

'Haddingham thinks that the cairns we are about to see represent the burials of a tribal dynasty, leaders who were not only chiefs but, to my mind, held almost the position of kings. He also thinks that this burial ground in the Kilmartin valley may have been in use for as much as two thousand years, one wave of owners succeeding another.

'The earliest structure you will see is a large — in fact, a massive — collective chambered tomb and the individual burials followed this, although excavation has shown that the Beaker People, who began coming here in about 1900BC, may have used this chambered long-barrow, with its multiple entombments, to house some of their own dead. Now, my boy' — he turned to Stewart — 'that should start you off. Who will join Stewart and Catherine, and who will follow me?'

'I will have Stewart to myself,' said Catherine. 'It is all going to be most interesting and I want to concentrate on what he is able to tell me. I do not wish to be distracted by idle chatter.' She took Stewart by the sleeve and led him away. 'I had not realised, though, when my cousin invited me to come along on this tour, that there would be quite so much emphasis on death,' she added, as the two of them made their way along the footpath which led to the first of the cairns. 'Do you think he is morbidly preoccupied with it?'

'With what? Oh, with death! I shouldn't think so.'

'I thought the Truth Game was rather morbid.'

'Did you? I'm afraid I treated it as a joke.'

‘That would be one way, I suppose, but I do not lay claim to a sense of humour, so we will be very serious. Please let my instruction begin.’

‘Certainly, so long as you bear in mind that what I shall express are not opinions arrived at by my own researches, but are simply the result of a certain amount of mugging-up.’

‘You should not waste your time on that girl when you have important academic work to do.’

‘Young Capella? Oh, that’s just to unbend the mind. I must have a little relaxation, you know, and pursuing the wench provides it.’

‘It is not a scholarly occupation and it is obviously embarrassing for the girl herself. If I am not mistaken, she is *virgo intacta* at present, so leave her alone.’

‘Good Lord! I wouldn’t dream of upsetting her apple-cart. I am like the huntsman who never catches a fox. I enjoy the gallop, that’s all. I’m more than willing to jump the fences or any other obstacles, but I don’t give a tinker’s curse about the end product. I can buy that if and when I want it, so don’t fret, dear maiden aunt. No respectable young woman will ever carry a load of mischief so far as I have any part in the transaction. If the female Barkis is willing, that is a different matter, and need not concern us at this juncture.’

‘Your conversational style might be considered offensive by some people,’ said Catherine, ‘but I believe you are as virtuous as you claim to be. As for your addressing me as your maiden aunt’ — she laughed with unaffected amusement and, it could be thought, pleasure — ‘there are compensations, no doubt, in bearing even that anomalous relationship towards you.’

‘Anomalous?’ said Stewart. ‘Irregular? Abnormal? You tread on strange ground, dear aunt. By the way, talking of relationships, Lionel and Clarissa had the father and mother of a row before we set out, I think. They had not a word to say to one another on the way here. It looks as though they’re still not on speaking terms at the moment. I hope it soon blows over.’

‘They have quarrelled? Good gracious! What was the bone of contention?’

‘The answers to the Truth Game last night, I expect. Clarissa may have thought that Lionel had given some deep, dark secret away by his answers to the questions—or, of course, vice versa.’

‘How interesting! One would like to be better informed.’

‘Sorry I can’t help you there. Their conversation, if and when it is resumed, may be acrimonious but, if I am right, it will also be carefully guarded. They will hardly be outspoken with the terrifying Dame B. able to hear everything they say in the car.’

‘There is something out of focus in their relationship, I feel. One wonders whether they really are married. I notice that they occupy separate rooms at the hotels.’

‘Probably one of them snores. Are you prepared to descend into this central cist, or are you inclined to claustrophobia?’

‘I don’t think many women care for deep, dark, enclosed spaces. I once was persuaded to descend into the prehistoric flint mines in the Norfolk Breckland and felt most unpleasantly apprehensive down there. But how did you know?’

Stewart did not answer. He said,

‘Grimes Graves? Oh, yes. I once went into a coalmine. Never again! Well, whatever else we miss in this place, we must have a look at the Temple Wood circle. There are cup-markings on a central stone which were only discovered in 1973 because they were partly hidden by the packing of stones used to keep the monolith upright.’

‘Is that of special interest?’

‘Yes, because archaeologists have thought that the ring-marks were sometimes made on the sacred stones before they were actually erected, and the fact that this particular carving remained hidden for so long seems to prove it.’

‘I had no idea that you could be such an interesting and informative companion.’

‘We do our best to please.’

‘I am glad we came here instead of going to Arran. I am also glad that my cousin has Dame Beatrice in tow. Would you call her a sinister woman? I noted that you think her terrifying.’

‘Sinister? No, I don’t think that is the word. Witchlike, perhaps, but there are white witches as well as black ones. Terrifying? Oh, rather! Yes, terrifying indeed.’

‘Like Owen, she has a morbid preoccupation with death, has she not?’

‘Would you say that? In spite of her great age, I would call her one of the most ‘alive’ people I know. She investigates murders, that’s all, and only in the public interest.’

‘Talking of enclosed spaces,’ said Catherine, ‘I must admit that I dread the thought of my last narrow enclosure. Would that I could be laid out in seemly fashion in the open air in the sun and the wind on some desert island and have it left to the wild creatures and the great predatory birds to pick me clean. Skeletons are beautiful structures if one has no malformations, and I have none. I would like to be a perfect skeleton lying out in the sun and the breezes.’

‘Who’s being morbid now?’ said Stewart, somewhat astonished by the strange but poetic picture which she had painted and presented. ‘What about cremation?’

‘Cremation? Oh, but why anticipate hell, when one’s soul will go there anyway?’ said Catherine, to his further astonishment.

‘Here,’ said Owen, as his party reached a huge pile of pebbles, ‘we have the most northerly of the five cairns which make up this early Bronze Age cemetery. It is the least spectacular, perhaps, and has been named Glebe Cairn, I suppose because of its proximity to Kilmartin Church.’

‘Its name is the best thing about it,’ said Clarissa, ‘just as my name is the best thing about me.’

‘The sites improve in interest as we proceed,’ said Owen, declining to comment on the last part of her remark. ‘At no great distance we have Nether Largie north cairn and Nether Largie mid-cairn.’

He led the way to them. Both contained stone burial cists and it was possible, although only Clarissa made the attempt, to enter the burial chamber in the Nether Largie north cairn.

‘Both cairns, as the name implies, were originally heaped over with pebbles,’ Owen went on when Clarissa rejoined them, ‘and both were excavated. Road-repairs, too, account for the removal of many of the stones from the mounds.’

Nether Largie south cairn was of special interest, according to Owen, for this was the one which had been begun as a Neolithic burial place and contained a four-part burial chamber.

‘Well, now,’ he said, ‘if you want to see any more, the area, as you will have noticed, is well sign-posted, but a certain amount of walking is necessary. I myself am anxious to exchange views with Stewart and then I want to go back to the car and make some notes. Please feel free to do exactly as you wish. If you care to walk so far, you will find the stone circle of Temple Wood just to the west of us. It is well worth a visit, although Ri Cruin cairn may prove a little too far. However, you have plenty of time.’

‘I’d love a walk,’ said Clarissa, ‘and I’d like to see as much as I can while I’m here.’

‘Then let us seek out Ri Cruin,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and take in Temple Wood on our way back.’

‘Professor Owen wants to keep an eye on Catherine, I think, but I’m glad to get you alone, Dame Beatrice,’ said Clarissa as they set out. ‘Will you answer a question I have no right to ask?’

‘Put your question and then you will know whether or not I shall answer it.’

‘I have two questions, as a matter of fact, one of which I think is perfectly proper, so I will ask that one first and then you may feel more inclined to answer the other one. Oh, well, actually there are three things I would like to know. Two are, in a sense, my business, the other is not, and you may think, and rightly, that it’s an impertinence on my part to ask it.’

‘Then I will save you embarrassment by stating at once that Mrs Gavin and I have not quarrelled or had any difference of opinion at all. She wanted to go across to Arran and so did the Sisters. Why Miss Babbacombe-Starr elected to accompany them I do not know. Possibly it was to free herself for a bit from Mr Stewart’s attentions.’

‘You have guessed the question, but you haven’t completed the answer, have you?’

‘You wish to know why I did not accompany the party which went to Arran?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Ask your other questions and maybe you will find out the complete answer to the first one.’

‘You sound as though you know what the other questions will be.’

‘Perhaps I can guess one of them, but put me through your Shorter Catechism and we shall see.’

‘I’ll ask the inoffensive one first. Have you been aware of an extra member of our party? — somebody, either man or woman, who dodges behind the megaliths in the stone circles we have visited and wants to be with us and yet to keep out of sight as far as possible?’

‘I will emulate the Jews, who are said to answer a question by asking another: have *you* been aware of such a person?’

‘No, I haven’t. Capella Starr mentioned the matter to me in Cumbria and asked me whether I had seen anyone and I had to say that I had not. I wished I could have told her differently, because I’m afraid she is a highly-strung and rather morbid girl. She said she wondered whether she was the person you had been asked to keep an eye on because she was going mad. She isn’t, is she?’

‘My dear child, I assure you, on my most solemn word, that I have not been asked to keep an eye on *anybody* in the party. Whether Professor Owen had any ulterior motive in inviting me to become a member of his tour I have no idea, but nothing has been said to me by him to suggest anything of the sort you mention. Now I will answer your question: like yourself, I have not been aware of any

clandestine presence at the sites I have visited. On the other hand, two of our party have. You mentioned Miss Starr, and I can mention, so Laura tells me, Sister Veronica.'

'I thought I had sharp eyes, but I've seen nothing, as I say.'

'Possibly there has been nothing to see.'

'Of course there have been other people about,' said Clarissa, ignoring the implications of Dame Beatrice's last remark. 'I mean, we haven't had the places entirely to ourselves. One wouldn't expect it. But that's not what Capella meant.'

'Quite. Perhaps it would be wise to leave it at that, and conclude that there is no extra member of our party.'

'My last question — and, whether you answer it or not, do please forgive me for asking it, but it is very important to me

'And has something to do — if *you* will forgive *me* — with the rather noticeable rift, only a temporary one, I trust — between you and Mr Lionel?'

'Yes. I shall have to kiss and make up. I can't bear being out with him. Dame Beatrice, what did you make of our answers to Professor Owen's Truth Game?'

'Mr Stewart was the only person who elected to be flippant. I thought the rest of you had told the truth, but not the whole truth.'

'And Lionel's answers?'

'They cannot have impressed me, or I should have remembered them.'

'Oh, they didn't impress you in any way?'

'Not in any way at all. Nothing of them stays in my mind.'

'I tried to make him tell me what he had put, but he got angry.'

'And you were afraid I might read between the lines and leap to unwarrantable conclusions?'

'I suppose so. They might not have been unwarrantable, you see.'

'Make your mind easy. Any conclusions I may have come to about the various members of our party, I reached long before Professor Owen proposed his dangerous Truth Game.'

'Oh, you saw it as dangerous?'

'Yes, indeed. The whole truth is always dangerous and a half-truth is more dangerous still. The human mind is all too prone to attempt to fill in the other half-truth, and that can indeed be perilous. I think I see our objective. Shall we change the subject and share our views on Ri Cruin cairn?'

'On the way back I'm going to look behind every stone in the Temple Wood circle. If there *is* somebody following us around, I've got to know who it is,' said Clarissa.

‘Morbid imaginings, secret fears, or idle curiosity?’

‘I don’t like being spied upon.’

‘Who does? Very well, we will play ring o’ roses round every monolith in Temple Wood, if that will ease your mind.’

‘Well, if there *is* anybody fooling about, they would be more likely to have followed our party rather than the four who’ve gone to Arran.’

‘Why so?’

‘Well, I can’t imagine anybody wanting to spy on Mrs Gavin or the nuns.’

‘That still leaves Miss Babbacombe-Starr, and, since we are bandying names, who, of our group here, would you pick out as a possible victim of espionage if you think we are being spied on? Yourself, for one, obviously. Who else?’

‘Any one of us, I suppose, and perhaps you in particular. Don’t you get scared at times about the murderers you have brought to justice? They must have friends, you know, and, what is more, friends who wouldn’t stop at very much.’

‘I hope you are not trying to alarm me.’

‘No, of course not. It was just a thought. I suppose we ought to be getting back. Dame Beatrice, I would love to confide in you, but I can’t.’

Temple Wood, when they reached it on the return journey, was a stone circle which had probably formed the boundary of a large cairn, for inside the circle was a cist grave and there were spiral markings at the base of a large stone on the northern side of the ring. The site was at the side of a minor road which separated it from Nether Largie south cairn and there was an adjacent area of woodland from which the ring took its name.

In spite of what she had said, Clarissa showed no sign of wanting to inspect the separate stones of the circle, and she and Dame Beatrice were soon on their way back to the cars.

‘By the way,’ said Laura that evening, after she and Dame Beatrice had exchanged news and views, and Laura had given Stewart an account of the circles on Machrie Moor ‘I did mention that the Shadowy Third bobbed up in conversation while we were on Arran, didn’t I? There is no doubt Sister Veronica is a bit troubled. I believe she thinks it’s an apparition.’

‘Well, from what rumours I have heard, neither Sister Veronica nor Miss Starr seems eager to mention the possible sex of our incubus, so an apparition it may be, of course.’

‘Good Lord, I hope not! I find these stone circles and tombs and cairns quite disturbing enough, without being stalked by a ghostly presence as well, and so I told Veronica and Capella.’

‘Some are born to see ghosts, others achieve ghosts — i.e. through fraudulent spirit mediums — while the rest, as personified by you and me, among others, have ghosts thrust upon them, as I believe I have pointed out before.’

‘If there *is* a ghost,’ said Laura uneasily, ‘it followed *your* party, not ours. I suppose nobody said anything about it to you?’

‘Oh, yes. Clarissa brought up the subject. For reasons which seemed to me inadequate, at a fairly early point in the proceedings Professor Owen left the two of us to continue the inspection of the tombs and so forth without his expert guidance. When we were alone, Clarissa brought up the subject of our visitant. We were on our way to a cairn you would have liked. It had axe-heads carved on the end stone of the cist and we saw other cavernous graves, too. Clarissa boldly made her way into one of them.’

‘I’m dashed if I would have done that. A bit frightening, wasn’t it? But what did she have to say about our unbidden guest?’

‘Nothing much, except to ask me whether I had seen it. I gathered that she had not.’

‘It’s a bit peculiar, you know, that the only people who claim to have spotted it are young Capella, who’s definitely superstitious, and Sister Veronica, who isn’t. What about myself, who am as superstitious as a deep-sea fisherman and bear the unenviable burden of wondering whether I possess the Gift? If there is anything to see, why haven’t I seen it?’

‘Because you are non-suggestible. But none of you had any uncomfortable experiences on Arran, you said.’

‘No, although Machrie Moor is wild enough and desolate enough to give rise to all sorts of fancies. To change the subject, was my guess right? Did Clarissa mention the Truth Game?’

‘Yes, she did. I was able to reassure her, but I would like, after dinner, to hear a transcription of your shorthand version of everybody’s answers.’

‘Rather fun. I suppose you’re going to do a further sorting out of sheep and goats. I wonder whether Lionel and Clarissa have kissed and made friends yet?’

‘I have my doubts. The conflict, I think, may take time to resolve itself.’

‘It will be a good thing when they do bury the hatchet, especially Lionel. A disgruntled driver is a dangerous driver. Anyway, two of your party seem to have got on pretty well together.’

‘Yes, indeed. On the way home Miss Catherine elected to share the back seat of the car with Mr Stewart. I was in front: It seemed to me that Miss Catherine

was in playful mood.'

'Catherine? In playful mood? How do you mean?'

'They skirmished and scuffled together.'

'Good Lord! How embarrassing of them!'

'She also tweaked his hair, I think, and on one occasion gave him a slap on the wrist.'

'It sounds as though the Argyll air really *is* like wine. What did you have to drink at lunch?'

'Orange squash.'

'Then it *must* have been the Argyll air. How are we going to sneak away this evening to go over those sets of answers?'

'We shall continue to play the Truth Game by telling the others what we are going to do, and by promising to declare the prizewinner before bedtime. We shall not mention that the answers are shorthand copies unless there seems reason to do so.'

Chapter 7

TRUE OR FALSE

‘The truth I’ll tell to thee, Janet;
Ae word I winna lee.’

Border Ballad — *Tam Lin*



So we await the Judgement of Paris,' said Owen in the manner of Ivy Compton Burnett. 'When is the great announcement to be made?'

'As soon as I have looked through my notes again,' Dame Beatrice replied.

'Oh, you went to the trouble of making notes, did you? I am flattered and surprised that you have given up so much of your time to judging my simple little competition.'

'What is the prize?' asked Capella.

'A book token. I decided I could not go wrong with that. It caters for all ages and for both sexes.'

'And does more good to the book trade than anything else which has ever been thought of,' said Catherine.

'Oh, of course, like Raymond Parsloe Devine, you are a rising young novelist,' said Stewart.

'Your reference escapes me, you silly boy.'

'He rose a foot and half when a golf-ball missed him by inches. But you were saying?'

'Oh, that wild horses wouldn't persuade most English people into a bookshop to buy books with their own money, but a book token can be exchanged for nothing else but books.'

'And people do give other people book tokens,' said Laura, 'because it's so convenient. You pop the card into an envelope, stick a stamp on, shove it in the post-box and there you are. No fiddling about with brown paper and string and having to queue up in the post-office to get the thing weighed, and then pay the earth to send it off. Book tokens are God's gift to the lazy-minded.'

'You make them sound hardly worth receiving,' said Lionel, 'yet I am always pleased when one or more — especially more — come my way.'

'Well, I don't suppose this one will,' said Clarissa.

'We retire to consider my verdict,' said Dame Beatrice, taking Laura off with her. When they reached her room and she had closed the door, Laura produced the couple of pages of shorthand which she had been carrying everywhere with her and waited for instructions.

'There are three marked C and two marked L,' she said: 'Isn't that a bit confusing?'

'No.'

‘I didn’t mean confusing to you and me. We can go by the context, but to somebody in a bit of a panic — invading your room, I mean, and all that — well, mightn’t he have picked the wrong C and landed himself with Catherine’s entry instead of, perhaps, Clarissa’s?’

‘It is possible, but if it was so important to him I do not think he would have picked up the wrong paper. If it was Owen, he would have known everybody’s writing, presumably, since he must have corresponded with all of us when he organised the expedition and is certainly familiar, one can assume, with Catherine’s hand; if it was Lionel, he would recognise Clarissa’s writing and anybody could tell at a glance which items of information had been scripted by the innocent and youthful Capella.’

‘There remains Stewart, so far as the men are concerned.’

‘Yes. There I am on less safe ground, I admit.’

‘And what about the women? If I had to choose between a man and a woman risking being seen oiling into your room with intent to sneak one of the papers, I would opt for one of our sex.’

‘You have a point.’

‘Well, we can knock out the nuns and me, so that leaves Catherine herself, who might have decided that her answers gave too much away; Capella, who wouldn’t have known Catherine’s writing from Clarissa’s, so may easily have picked the wrong set of answers; and Clarissa, who has had a row with Lionel. She makes up one half of a couple who seem to have something to hide.’

‘I think that, if Clarissa had taken one of the papers, it would have been Lionel’s.’

‘Same reason as his, only *vice versa*? Yes, I suppose that’s true. It rather brings me back to Owen, who proposed the game in the first place.’

‘Read to me what Catherine had written before her paper was abducted.’

Catherine had written:

‘I came on this tour to try to get copy for my next novel. ‘If I had not come I might have missed a most wonderful experience.

‘My secret fear is of confined spaces and my pet superstition is that hell has no fury like a disappointed man.’

‘Well,’ said Laura. ‘I don’t see why anybody needed to steal those answers.’

‘She has answered the second question in the way Professor Owen intended.’

‘The lonely spinster complex?’

‘Something more rational, perhaps. To resolve your own doubts — ’

‘That somebody picked out the wrong set of answers? Well, now I look at

them again, I still think I might be right. How about these being mistaken for one of the other two sets marked C? Here is another set:

‘I was keen to come on the tour because I got interested in stone circles when I was very young. ‘If I had not come, I suppose I would have been paying visits to my brothers and my sister, all married. Could not have afforded a holiday in Greece. ‘My secret fear is of having to earn my own living as, like Wilfred Holmes, I am not capable of this, so my favourite superstition is that there really *is* a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow.’

‘I think it is obvious who wrote all that.’

‘Oh, that’s Capella Babbacombe-Starr all right,’ said Laura. ‘That only leaves Clarissa. Do you want to hear what she had to say?’

‘Oh, it will be interesting, since we know she has fallen out with Lionel.’ Laura read aloud again from her shorthand.

‘I came on this tour to please Lionel. I would much rather have gone to the South of France. ‘If I had not come, that is where I would be. ‘My secret fear is that secrets leak out and my favourite superstition is that dead men *do* tell tales.’

‘So much for the three C’s,’ said Laura. ‘Do you want to hear any more?’

‘As this is a competition, I suppose I had better hear all the entries. When you have read them to me and unless there is anything particularly striking about any of them, we will go downstairs and award the prize.’

‘Oh, you’ve decided upon the winner? Same as the one you first thought of?’

‘Yes, I shall announce that Sister Pascal has won Professor Owen’s prize. I am most impressed that she has expressed herself in rhyme. Read it again, please.’

Laura complied. Sister Pascal had written:

‘I joined the tour, as you can see,
To keep a Sister company.
Had I not come, I should have gone
To Bruges or Ghent or Ratisbon.
With earthly fears I long have done,
So superstitions have I none.’

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘there has been worse verse. I think we may lay our hands on our swords and defy anybody to deny that in this short, trenchant poem we have the winning entry.’

‘Well, you had decided upon Sister Pascal all along.’

‘But how satisfying to be justified in my choice!’ Her choice was not only justified, but was acclaimed by one and all. Sister Pascal, reduced, to Laura’s amusement, to blushing deprecation of the honour accorded her, was persuaded to read her contribution aloud. She took the longhand copy which Laura had made, looked at it and said, ‘But this isn’t my writing.’

‘No,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Some of the answers were revealing and others were obviously untruthful, so I thought it discreet to destroy all the papers. Besides,’ she added, when the laughter had subsided, ‘the fact is that Professor Owen’s large envelope, so thoughtfully provided, would not fit into my handbag, so I asked Laura to take down all the answers in shorthand, read them back to me and transcribe the one of my choice.’

That night there came a tap at her bedroom door. She opened it to find Catherine standing in the corridor.

‘I would like to know,’ said the visitor, ‘whether you found my answers either revealing or untruthful. They were not intended to be either, although I think you were joking when you used those words.’

‘Come in,’ said Dame Beatrice. Catherine entered and Dame Beatrice closed the door. ‘As I told everybody, all the papers have been destroyed, but I remember your answers perfectly well for a very good reason.’

‘You thought them morbid and fanciful, perhaps.’

‘Not so. I remember them because the original draft, the one you yourself had written, was stolen while I was out of my room. Fortunately I still had Laura’s shorthand version to fall back on. Can I help you in any way?’

‘Oh, I don’t need a psychiatrist.’

‘May I ask you one question, a practical one?’

‘I am not a woman wailing for a demon lover.’

‘My dear Miss Catherine!’

‘Oh, ask your question. I need not answer it.’

‘Did any member of our party know of your fear of confined spaces?’

‘My cousin Owen may know. As a child I always refused to play hide and seek. At a tender age I learned about *The Mistletoe Bough*, and it frightened me very much.’

‘A strangely-titled song,’ Dame Beatrice said, and waited. At the back of her mind were the tombs in Kilmartin valley.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Catherine, after a pause. ‘It begins: *The mistletoe hung in the castle hall.*’

‘Yes. I always wonder why people have mistletoe in their homes at

Christmas. It used to be regarded as a sacred plant not unconnected with death.'

'Human sacrifice, I suppose you mean. Oh, well, we have two lambs among us and both are at risk, I'm afraid. I refer to Sister Veronica and Miss Babbacombe-Starr. Both are young, both vulnerable, both virgins and both visionaries. They could not be in greater danger. We have predators among us, Dame Beatrice.'

Dame Beatrice wondered what Stewart had talked about while he and Catherine had been alone together in Kilmartin valley. She said, 'Perhaps you should look to yourself, my dear Miss Owen. Remember that I am not the only person who has read your answers to the Truth Game.'

Chapter 8

CAPELLA'S DREAM

‘The evil about which you ask me has been sown,
but its reaping has not yet come.’

(New English Bible; Apocrypha) 2 Esdras 4 v.28



Is something worrying you?' asked Laura, on the following morning.
'No,' Dame Beatrice replied. 'I am worried only when I cannot make up my mind.'

'Well, that doesn't happen very often. Do I ask what has been causing you to take thought?'

'Certainly, especially as I may need your help.'

'More shorthand?'

'No, I want you to persuade young Miss Babbacombe-Starr to come to the Outer Hebrides with us if my own representations to her are unsuccessful.'

'I don't think I shall be needed. She's only a kid and she'll do as you tell her.'

'On the face of it, yes, but she may feel a little delicate in accepting the trip as a gift from me.'

'Oh, Lord, yes, the financial angle. She told me she borrowed the money from her father to come on this tour, so she won't have budgeted for a stay on Lewis. Why do you want her to come with us?'

'I refer you once again to the sheep and the goats. The trouble will be with one of the goats if I attempt to detach her from him.'

'Oh, Stewart, you mean. So we're really going to Stornoway, are we? Thank you for standing firm with Owen. After all, the stones on Lewis were on the programme he sent us. What about the nuns?'

'I shall have a word with Sister Pascal, I think. Fortunately nobody but ourselves knows what was written on Sister Veronica's Truth Game paper.'

Laura took the sheets of shorthand out of her handbag and looked at the entry marked V.

'I came on the tour for educational purposes. If I had not come I should have been staying at our convent in Kent. My secret fear is of having to see the next thing that happens, but I do not indulge in superstition because it is allied to witchcraft and therefore sinful.'

'Yes,' said Dame Beatrice, 'her secret fear, I suspect, is connected with this wraith which flits from stone to stone and is visible only to Sister Veronica, who is a mystic, and the child Capella, who can see anything which is suggested to her.'

‘You don’t mean they are both seeing a ghost? We did mention ghosts, I remember.’

‘I am not sure what they are seeing, but I am going to issue a solemn warning to Sister Pascal not to let Sister Veronica out of her sight when we get to Inverness.. and you and I must make ourselves responsible for Capella. I did not like the way the Truth Game had to be played and I do not like it at all that the rumour of this flitting figure has gone the round of our party.’

‘Thanks to Stewart.’

‘He is mischievous and irresponsible and may find himself in trouble for someone else’s sins.’

‘Not only a goat, but a scapegoat, you think, our young archaeologist?’

‘The scapegoat itself is always an innocent party, remember,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I mentioned someone else’s sins.’

The original plan, as set out in Owen’s letter of invitation to Dame Beatrice and Laura, had specified a one-night stay in Inverness, as two of the party wanted to leave the tour there. After that the rest of the travellers would be going to Ullapool on the following morning to make the crossing to Stornoway.

But for these two people (who turned out, as Stewart had told Laura, to be the nuns), the party, who in any case were due to break the journey and put in a night at Fort William, would have made the very short sea-passage from Kyle of Lochalsh to Kyleakin on Skye, driven north to Uig and made the shorter crossing to Tarbert on Harris and from there driven up to Stornoway.

After the last breakfast at Ardrossan, Owen made his announcement of a change of plan. ‘Some of us,’ he said, ‘Stewart and myself in particular, have decided to stay on in Inverness and study the Clava complex instead of crossing to Lewis. The party, I regret to say, is about to break up this morning in any case. Lionel and Clarissa are leaving us and returning home.’

It was not until they were being seen off by the others that the rest of the party knew that not only Lionel and Clarissa were departing, but that Catherine was going with them. The explanation given by Owen, who seemed somewhat ruffled, was that she was due to lecture in America at the end of the month and had become apprehensive lest there were still last-minute arrangements which might need to be altered.

‘Just nerves,’ he said; an observation which hardly coincided with what the majority of the party knew of Catherine.

‘At any rate, Mr Stewart seems to be staying with the main party,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I half-wondered whether he might have made up his mind to go home

in Lionel's car, but it seems not to be so.'

'He surely can't prefer Catherine to Capella?'

'Who can tell? Miss Catherine has great, although, perhaps, somewhat forbidding beauty.'

Dame Beatrice managed to get a word in private with Sister Pascal while Sister Veronica had gone upstairs to inspect both the hotel rooms to make sure that nothing had been left in drawers or wardrobes by the nuns.

'I will do as you say,' said the prioress, 'but make your mind easy, dear Dame Beatrice. We are to be accommodated in a convent in Inverness and as soon as we have visited the Clava stones, where I shall see to it that Sister Veronica does not leave my side, we are returning to London and from there to Exeter by train. The atmosphere of the tour has changed. I am fully conscious of it. Something happened over that stupid game and I am sorry that I was given the prize.'

'You can always raffle it in aid of some good cause.'

The nun smiled and said that as the card was unmarked such a solution had already occurred to her. Then she became grave again and asked why Dame Beatrice had fears for Sister Veronica's safety, for the young nun could harm nobody. Dame Beatrice replied that she had meant only that precautions should be taken because of the rumours which had gone around that the two youngest of the party had seen 'things which, to the rest of us, are not there, my dear Sister'.

'We are accustomed to Sister Veronica's strange gift,' said Pascal. 'She has often, and sometimes against her will, demonstrated it. On occasion it has proved useful, too. An unscrupulous landowner once demanded that we produce the title-deeds to one of our Houses, having, no doubt, heard that the head of our Order had never disclosed where she had put the papers. Sister Veronica, after we had searched everywhere, said one evening that there was somebody at the door, but the portress had heard nothing and neither had the rest of the Sisters. The door was opened, but nobody was there. Sister Veronica then asked permission to answer the door herself. This was given and she returned to say that Mother Ambrose had told her that the deeds were in an iron box under the floor of the Community Room. Well, there they were, of course. I may add, and this will not surprise you, that Mother Ambrose had been dead for months.'

'I have heard of such instances. People with Sister Veronica's gift are not to be envied. I am making myself responsible for Miss Babbacombe-Starr. Both these young women may be in some danger and so may Professor Owen's cousin Catherine. I would have warned her, had I known that she was not

remaining with the party. She has gone, it seems, with Lionel and Clarissa.'

'Those two are brother and sister, are they not?'

'I think they are unidentical twins.'

'Theirs is a strange relationship.'

Dame Beatrice did not ask what the nun meant. Considering all the circumstances, the remark was a charitable one, and she respected Sister Pascal for not enlarging upon it. They parted when Sister Veronica came back. Dame Beatrice sought out Capella and said, 'We propose to leave Inverness as previously arranged, and sail from Ullapool to Stornoway and return from Tarbert on Harris to Uig on Skye. We shall probably spend two or three nights on Skye and then meander home at our leisure with two or three stops en route. I want you to join us.'

'Oh, but — ' said Capella.

'You are in a hurry to return home?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'It isn't that. It's just — well — I was prepared for *one* night at Stornoway, but it's — '

'The money,' said the practical Laura, who was with them. 'It's all right. Dame B. will stand Sam. She has decided that she likes your company.'

'Oh, but, really!'

'I had hoped to add Miss Catherine to my little party,' said Dame Beatrice, 'but it is not to be.'

'I don't understand,' said Capella helplessly. 'You can't really want my company. We've had almost nothing to do with one another.'

'Don't look a gift horse in the teeth, my love,' said Laura. 'Callanish is second only to Stonehenge in importance and I'm more than delighted to have the chance to see it.'

'We can fly back to Inverness from Stornoway and see Clava, and go home from there, if you wish. There is a flight every day and it only takes about forty minutes,' said Dame Beatrice, 'but I think a little holiday on Skye — '

'But, look here — ' said Capella.

'Stop trying to argue,' said Laura roundly. 'Weren't you brought up to do as you're told? Don't you want to see Callanish and then go on to Skye?'

'Yes, of course, only — '

'My child,' said Dame Beatrice, 'as there appears to be no reason for you to hurry home, I really think that you should indulge a very old woman.'

'Well, I — well, thank you very much, but I don't understand in the least why you want me with you.'

‘ “So wonder on, till Truth make all things plain”, ’ said Laura.

‘Oh, it’s something to do with that silly Truth Game, is it?’

‘Is it?’ asked Dame Beatrice. ‘Why will you insist on finding reasons? I am entitled to my whims and fancies, and you will be company for Laura.’

‘With whom you will share a room,’ said Laura. ‘Sorry about that, but you know what high-season bookings are like. You have to take what you can get.’ She had seen Stewart come into earshot. He strolled up to them.

‘There was a spare seat beside Catherine in Lionel’s car,’ said Capella pointedly. ‘Wouldn’t you rather have had that than stay with Owen?’

‘No, but thank you kindly for asking,’ he replied. ‘I can’t miss the chance to study Clava. Why don’t you walk round with me? There will be lots I can tell you.’

‘There was no plan originally to visit the Clava stones,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘We were promised Callanish, and that is where we are going.’

‘I’ve been there. Oh, well!’ He smiled at them all. ‘We’ve still got a couple of days together.’

They left Inverness early on the appointed morning and drove westward across moorland wastes, with a fine view of An Teallach’s three and a half thousand feet to break the monotonous foreground.

When they reached Ullapool they found it crowded with summer visitors; there was a long queue of foot-passengers waiting for the ferry and a long line of cars with bored but patient drivers also waiting to cross to the islands.

There was very little deck-space on the ferry and, in any case, there was little incentive to stay outside, for a strong wind was blowing, the sky was heavy with cloud and, after the first uncomfortable twenty minutes, even Laura was forced to take shelter as the rain began to fall. The saloon was full, every seat taken, so she went below and found room at a table in the canteen, but she was thankful when the crossing ended in the harbour of Stornoway and she could get her car on to the quay and to the hotel she had booked over the telephone.

The hotel was a very large building on rising ground, but not far from the sea. The party were shown to a double and a single room reached by a long, inconvenient route which involved traversing two enormous public rooms, descending a stone staircase with an iron handrail, following a concreted corridor and mounting a flight of carpeted wooden stairs at the far end of it.

‘Well,’ said Laura, when they reached the little suite, ‘I should have something to say about this Sabbath day’s journey if ours had not been an altered booking. The plan had been only for a one-night stay.’

‘We shall obtain plenty of exercise, at any rate,’ said Dame Beatrice placidly, surveying her small apartment with an indulgent eye. ‘We have some time to spare before dinner. What do you propose to do with the rest of your day?’

‘Subject to your approval, I am going to have a wash and then go out and explore the town,’ said Laura. ‘And you?’

‘I shall find my way about the hotel and then rest until dinnertime.’

On her way out Laura almost ran into Capella who was emerging from the bathroom. Capella asked whether she was going for a walk and upon receiving an affirmative reply, said that, if Laura had no objection, she would like to accompany her. In the ordinary way Laura would have preferred a solitary excursion, but under the circumstances she was well pleased to have the girl with her and they set out together. Laura was determined on one thing: if she was obliged to have company, at least she would select the route.

This led automatically to the harbour and then they traversed the town itself. Laura was surprised to find it so large, so modern and so well supplied with the kind of shops she would have expected in any mainland town of comparable size. Back at the quay, Laura looked across to the other side of the harbour where, well above the shore-line, there were trees.

‘I thought Lewis was all peat,’ she said. ‘I certainly didn’t expect to see woodland.’

‘No. Trees are unusual in the Outer Hebrides,’ agreed Capella. ‘I believe the peat doesn’t extend over the whole of Lewis, though. I read that there is more fertile land on the west side. I say, Mrs Gavin...’ She paused and also halted. Laura eased up and they stood gazing over the water. After a bit Capella went on: ‘Well, this is going to sound childish and so silly that you’re the only person I have nerve enough to confide in.’

‘Thanks for the double-edged compliment.’

‘Oh, no, I assure you! What I mean is that you seem so safe and sensible.’

‘Motherly is the word you’re looking for and, as I am the mother of two, one about your age and the other a few years older, you have come to the right shop, although I can’t think what you want to buy from me.’

‘Does your Dame Beatrice analyse dreams?’

‘She’s interested in them. I expect all psychiatrists would be, wouldn’t they?’

‘Well, I’m not a very good traveller on the sea. When we got on board I took a fairly strong tranquilliser, got myself an armchair in the saloon before they were all occupied and went to sleep.’

‘Sensible girl! It was rather a beastly crossing, anyway. I was extremely

disappointed. I'd been rather looking forward to it. Incidentally, you seemed all right when we crossed over to Arran.'

'Oh, that was different. It was a lovely day and the sea was quite calm. I was able to stay out in the fresh air, and it was a short passage, anyway.'

'Sorry I interrupted. You were saying you went to sleep on the boat and I think you were talking about dreams.'

'Do you mind?'

'Of course not. Was yours a bad one?'

'I don't know. It seemed all right and quite natural, but I don't think I want to go to Callanish tomorrow.'

'Pity to miss it when you've come all this way.'

'Well, if I do go, you won't mind if I dog your footsteps, will you? There's strength and a self-confidence about you that will protect me from evil.'

Laura began to think that the identity of Dame Beatrice's prospective patient was being very clearly revealed. The girl spoke quietly and with sincerity, but Laura knew enough of Dame Beatrice's work to realise that these were not necessarily symptoms of rationality. With misgivings she said,

'Of course you must walk round with us tomorrow. I shall be with Dame B. all the time, and she's the tower of strength, not I. You certainly won't come to any harm in *her* company.'

'Thank you. Well, about this dream: I ought to begin by telling you that although I may have seen a picture of the Callanish stones, it would have been so long ago that I've forgotten them and I've never before been on Lewis in my life, so I don't suppose the stone circle I saw in my dream will bear any relationship whatever to the real thing. If it doesn't I shall be very thankful, I can tell you.'

'This sounds interesting,' said Laura. 'Say on.'

'I found myself on rising ground with my back to the sea, or perhaps it was a loch. Anyway, it was water. I didn't turn my head to look, but I knew there was water quite near. The stones have to be near water. Did you know that? Well, never mind. There was a crowd of people and we were all looking down towards the stones. They formed quite a different pattern from anything I'd seen before. I don't mean only the stone circles we've seen on this trip. When I was about twelve or so, my father took us to see stone circles which he thought were connected with our names. Mine was the circle in Oxfordshire called the Rollright Stones. For a long time I forgot all about them and there was a poltergeist interlude which was a bit frightening but far more interesting and, in

a way, rather fun. When I read Professor Owen's advertisement and remembered the pilgrimage with my father, I wrote to Owen and I was very pleased when my application was accepted.'

She stopped speaking. Laura began to walk on, remarking, 'You were on rising ground with your back to the sea or a loch or something. This was part of your dream?'

'Oh, yes. I was looking down on the standing stones and wondering why we had never finished the four avenues.'

'Four avenues?' said the startled Laura, who had seen photographs of the stones. 'How did you know there were four avenues? Oh, photographs, of course.'

'The whole thing looked like a Celtic cross. The stone circle was the middle of it, the avenue nearest me formed the top of the cross, but this had only five stones. It looked as though, after we had erected four stones on one side and one on the other, we had tired of the job, and the same seemed true of the two arms of the cross, for they weren't avenues at all, but tall stones set in a single line right and left of the stone circle. The only true avenue of stones was what you might call the long stem of the cross. This was on the further side of the stone circle from where I was standing and I could look straight down it.'

'Remarkable, if all you had seen was a photograph. What was the circle itself like?'

'It was made up of tall stones with one of them, the tallest, standing slightly inside the rest of the ring as though it had an importance the others did not have. It was as though it was there to guard the tomb.'

'The tomb?' Again Laura was astonished. It was almost impossible to distinguish its tiny remains in any photograph she had seen. 'There was a hole in the ground inside the stone circle. Suddenly there was a lot of shouting. I knew everybody was shouting, although in my dream I couldn't hear a thing. I knew I was shouting, too, although no voice came. Then everything went dark and a great star shone and fires were lighted. Then two processions formed up, one on our side and the other at the end of the long completed avenue opposite us, and there was singing, but again I could not hear it although I was joining in. Can you hear sounds when you are dreaming, Laura? I may call you Laura, mayn't I?'

'Sure you may. No, come to think of it, I don't believe I do hear sounds in my dreams. Tell you another strange thing that always comes about in my dreams. I happen to be a very keen swimmer and more often than not there is a

lovely stretch of water in my dream. Sometimes it's a river, sometimes a lake or a pond, sometimes only flood-water covering the garden, but always deep enough for swimming, although it's never, strangely enough, the sea. Anyway, as soon as, full of joyful anticipation, I begin to swim, the water all disappears and I find myself scrabbling about on little stones or mud. I can never get to swim. Dreadfully disappointing and frustrating. Talking of water, one of the other guests in the hotel as we came through the lounge was mentioning a family of seals here in the harbour. The fishermen feed them. They believe they bring luck and will see the men don't drown.'

'There were seals in my dream. They came to us when the fertility rites were over.'

'The fertility rites?'

'Yes. First into the stone circle came a man wearing a sort of apron made from feathers. They were ducks' feathers, although how I knew that I can't explain. Well, there was more singing and people were stamping their feet and the man in duck feathers began to dance and I think there were other bonfires somewhere further off. As he danced the singing got wilder and one by one the men who were near me ran into the circle and danced too, and then all the women with me disappeared. The bonfires died down, the great star — I knew it was Capella, *my* star — came very close to one of the tallest stones, and then the seals came.'

'“The great silkie of Sule Skerry”,' muttered Laura.

'No, they must all have been females, because as soon as they flippered their way into the circle they all turned into beautiful girls who danced with the men,' said Capella.

'There are all sorts of tales,' said Laura, 'and I expect you've read them at some time.'

'Perhaps. I don't remember much more, but I woke up crying. Just before I woke I thought I was kneeling by the grave in the centre of the circle of stones and feeling an unbearable agony of grief for whoever was lying there.'

'And was anybody lying there?' asked Laura with unusual gentleness.

'Yes,' said Capella. 'I myself was lying there. I was weeping at my own graveside.'

'A very nasty dream.'

'Yes, it was. I shall have to go to Callanish with you, after all, if only to break it. Mine was a ritual death. I knew that, and I didn't want to be dead. I didn't want them to take my blood to make the crops to grow.'

‘Dreams are the strangest things,’ said Laura. ‘I’ve had the same experience in dreams — being detached from myself I mean, and able to see and understand what was happening to the other me. Odd, that. I must ask Dame B. about it at some time. You mentioned seals. What happened to them?’

‘Oh, I remember now. After the dancing the men and the seal-women threw themselves on the ground and coupled.’

‘Ah, yes, sympathetic magic, like chucking a basinful of water skywards to give the rain a hint that it’s needed for the crops. Fertility rites always end up by increasing the tribal numbers. This is supposed to give the crops and the cattle a lead by way of indicating that they are required to grow and multiply.’

‘The seal-women were wonderful,’ said Capella, halting and looking out to sea again. ‘They came up out of the water and as they advanced into the circle they turned into people, as I told you — glorious, beautiful people with great, burning, dark eyes and bodies which seemed clothed in light, and, oh, Laura, I longed to join them, but there I was, in my envelope of stone with the “other me” looking on and I couldn’t get up and go to them, although I knew that was where I belonged.’

‘You know the poem, do you?’

‘The “envelope of stone”, you mean?’

‘Yes. Dame B. has a hobby of reading modern poetry which, incidentally, she reads aloud most beautifully. You must have noticed what a lovely voice she has.’

‘*The True Confession of George Barker?*’

‘Yes. I found it and asked her to read it to me. She did, and then she turned up his *In Memory of a Friend* in Philip Larkin’s *Oxford Book*. Do you know that poem, too?’

‘Yes, indeed I do,’ said Capella. ‘What about it?’

‘“To those that love there are no dead, Only the long sleepers.” So don’t worry about your dream any more.’

‘All the same, what do you make of that dream of hers?’ Laura asked Dame Beatrice after dinner that night, when Capella had gone upstairs to finish unpacking.

‘The same as you do. She has seen a photograph of the Callanish stones at some time, and read the surmises about them.’

‘Still, you must admit it was a very strange dream.’

‘I had a patient once who dreamed he was hanged and in his dream he helped to cut himself down from the gallows. Talking of strange things, I had a strange

encounter with Professor Owen's cousin Catherine before she left the party. She seemed to think Capella was in some danger.'

'But *is* she in danger?'

'Possibly, but more probably not.'

'You insisted on detaching her from the rest of the party.'

'Only as a precautionary measure. More important is the fact that Miss Catherine has interpreted a warning I gave her in a way that I did not expect. It might have been better had she come with us to Lewis.'

'She had her lecture tour to think about.'

'It was last-minute thinking, though, wasn't it?'

Chapter 9

CALLANISH AND THE BLACK HOUSE OF ARNOL

‘It is mighty curious, Huck. I don’t understand it.’

Mark Twain



Except that they were seldom out of sight of a house, the scenery on the drive next day to Callanish might have depressed the travellers. The island was given over to hundreds of tiny crofts, none of them covering more than a few acres. Each had its neat pile of turf for fuel, beautifully stacked near the dwelling, and the houses themselves surprised Laura. Although most of them were neighboured by the original croft cottage now untenanted and crumbling into ruin, the occupied houses looked wellbuilt, modern and indicative of moderate prosperity on the part of the owners.

The crofts themselves looked non-productive. Potatoes were grown, Laura supposed, but probably only enough of them for each family's own use. Here and there she noticed patches of barley and sometimes there were chickens and sometimes a few sheep and she wondered how the inland population, those who were not fishermen, managed to make a living. Some of them, no doubt, were employed at the Stornoway airport which (with a change of aeroplane here and there en route) connected the island with Benbecula, Inverness, Glasgow and London. Other islanders probably worked for the shipping company which ran the ferry service or had jobs on the mainland, while the oil-rigs provided employment for others.

The outing was conveniently planned as a circular tour. After Callanish the car would follow the coast road northwards to Arnol and then cross the island back to Stornoway from Barvas with its fine salmon river and its superstition that if a woman was the first person to ford the river on May Day, this would bring bad luck to the fishing and the season's catch would be a poor one.

The sad-looking few miles of peaty moorland having been covered in excellent time, for there seemed to be no traffic on the roads, the car pulled up in a by-road almost at the end of the long double row of standing stones which Capella had referred to as the only complete avenue. It was not entirely complete, in that there were noticeable gaps here and there from which stones had been removed, but the rest of the scene was as the girl had described it.

'I don't believe any photograph a child had seen would have made such an impression on her mind that she would have had such a clear recollection of it, even in a dream,' said Laura to Dame Beatrice. 'I thought it uncanny when she told me about it and I think it still more uncanny now that I'm seeing the place for myself.'

Capella had walked away from them and was standing with her right hand resting on a tall grey stone at the end of the unfinished western arm of a complex which did indeed bear a striking resemblance to a Celtic cross with the circle of thirteen stones as its centre.

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘we have seen nothing like this before.’

The site had a mystic awesomeness about it, for the stones had the strangely striking appearance of stark and ravaged humanity. Laura commented upon this.

‘I’ve read about this place,’ she said. ‘There are the usual legends, of course. The islanders call the stones *Fir Bhreig*, false men, and say they were once giants who inhabited the island and refused Christian baptism, so St. Kieran turned them to stone. There is also a story about a white cow which came up out of the sea and gave a pailful of milk every day to the island women until a witch came with a sieve and milked it dry.’

‘Strange how legends repeat themselves in the folklore of people who cannot have met one another. There was the cow Adumla in Scandinavian myth. She came up out of the ice and found a saltlick and licked it into a hole from which emerged the Norse gods, Odin, Thor, Baldur, Loki and the rest,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and there are many legends of men turned to stone either by the power of witchcraft or as a punishment for misdeeds, and this applies to women also. Shall we join our young friend? She looks as though she had gone into a trance.’

‘I’m not sure we did the right thing in bringing her here. I don’t wonder she’s a bit peculiar.’ She was telling me the other day that her father makes his living by contributing chunks of written matter about the occult and other mysterious topics to journals which cater for the many-headed who like such things. The kid was probably brought up on ghost-stories and fairy-tales. Incidentally, I’ll say, with my usual boldness, that the Irish are the only people who have ever really understood fairies, to know what they are like.’

They had been walking up the northern, almost complete avenue of stones and had reached the circle. They crossed it and, passing the row of single stones which formed the unfinished top of the cross, ascended the knoll from which they could see the waters of Loch Roag.

‘The Irish?’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh, yes. They had no truck with little people with wings and wands. The leprechauns, I suppose, are their substitutes for those. No, the Irish saw the fairies as the “great host of the Sidh”, taller than human beings and of great, though terrible beauty, the “shining ones”, the “lordly ones who live in the hills, in the hollow hills”. The chap who wrote that song knew all about them.’

They returned to the stone circle. There had been a cairn there, but excavation had left little trace of it, except for the small cist which had been part of a passage grave. Dame Beatrice remained in contemplation of it while Laura walked over to Capella, who was still leaning against her thin grey pillar of Lewissian gneiss.

‘Well,’ she said cheerfully, ‘that was some dream of yours! Are you sure you never saw this place before?’

‘I certainly never did, except in my dream,’ said the girl, ‘and perhaps a photograph I have forgotten.’

‘Join us, won’t you?’

‘Yes, in a minute, when you’ve looked into the tomb and are sure there’s nothing there.’

‘There can’t be. If there was, Dame Beatrice would notice it. I’ll wave my handkerchief to give you the all-clear, anyway, when I’ve had a look.’

‘You’re very understanding. Most people would laugh at me.’

‘I’m a Highlander. Besides, half the people on these islands claim to have second sight. You may be the sort of person who kind of breathes in the atmosphere of a place.’

‘Well, at any rate, there is nobody dodging about behind the stones. The strange thing is that now I’m here — in the flesh, I mean, instead of in my dream — I don’t really feel afraid any more. I don’t feel a bit like I felt at Castlerigg. That was terrifying, because I saw the dead body lying in that rectangle of stones, I know I did.’

‘Man or woman?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve wondered that myself, but I simply don’t know.’

Laura went back to Dame Beatrice, who was still looking at the tiny chambered tomb with its eighteen-foot guardian stone appearing to loom over it. She was peering down at the two little compartments separated by stone slabs. There was nothing whatever in the tomb. Laura took out her handkerchief and waved it. Capella hesitated for a moment and then walked forward and joined them.

‘No, there is nothing here,’ she said, looking into the hole.

‘This isn’t the only stone circle hereabouts,’ said Laura, ‘but it’s by far the most complicated and perfect. Why don’t we go and have a look at the others and then come back here for purposes of comparison? We’ve plenty of time.’

‘I’d like that,’ said Capella.

‘You didn’t dream about the other circles?’ asked Laura, as the two of them

followed Dame Beatrice to the car.

‘No. I saw this one and my dead body and the seal-women, and I saw the priest-king, but they were all on this one site, and there can’t be another one like it.’

To find the other stone circles involved going back on their tracks for about a couple of miles to an oval, about forty feet by thirty, which had a low central stone and a cairn. This circle could have been seen on their outward route, but the other two circles — one exceptionally large when it was constructed, and now almost in ruins — were off a road which went south of the Stornoway route and was almost on the sea-shore. The other, a little further inland, was a concentric circle with the tallest stones forming the inner ring.

None of them had the grandeur and the mystery of Callanish with its strange suggestion of being planned in the shape of the symbol of Christianity, and with its central ring, its one complete and three vaguely-suggested avenues of stones and its small double-cist grave guarded by the tallest stone of all.

‘Dashed weird, this set-up,’ said Laura, when they returned. ‘There’s no possible comparison between this and the others. Still, I’m glad we’ve seen the lot. There must have been quite a settlement here in the early times.’

‘Climatic changes altered things,’ said Capella. ‘There are five feet of peat on top of the good earth now, except where they’ve dug it out from around the stones. It used to be warmer when I lived in these parts before.’

Laura made no comment. Dame Beatrice walked to the car and sat in it while the other two walked to the knoll and looked across to where the waters of Loch Roag, sheltered by the island of Great Bernera, washed against the pre-pelagian shore. Capella pointed.

‘That’s where the seals came from. This is where I stood in my dream. The grave was not there then. It came later.’

This was not quite the same story as the one she had told before.

‘So you did not see the heaped-up cairn,’ said Laura.

‘No, I did not see the cairn, and I don’t know whether it was heaped over me or over the priest-king when he died. I will tell you something, though, Laura. Not only had the ceremonies some connection with water — you will have noticed that the stones we have seen are never very far from the sea or a loch or a river — but what is done must be done in the presence of the dead.’

‘Yes, I’ve read that, too,’ said Laura. ‘I think we must have read the same books, you know. You must have got through a lot of indigestible books at an early age for them to have made such an impression on your mind.’

‘You think that’s the explanation of my dream, don’t you?’

‘Well, it’s a reasonable one, in my view.’

‘I should like to believe it, but it doesn’t explain that flitting figure at the other stone circles. Did you read about Callanish specially? I mean, did you and Dame Beatrice always mean to come here instead of seeing the things at Clava?’

‘I believe I hankered after Callanish and I have seen the Clava stones. Besides, they were not on the original itinerary. We *expected* to visit Callanish.’

‘I am glad I came. It has broken my dream in a way.’

‘You’re too imaginative by half. I must say that your dream must have been very vivid, but everything you described is in the books, albeit a lot of it is archaeological guesswork. Well, I wonder whether we ought to be making tracks? We’ve still got to visit the Black House of Arnol, and I’m beginning to think I can do with my lunch which I can’t have until we get back to the hotel.’

She was also beginning to think that it was not such a bad thing, after all, to have brought Capella to Callanish. The girl now seemed relaxed and cheerful. At Capella’s next remark, however, she changed her mind again.

‘Yes, we must go,’ said Capella. ‘That tall stone which guards the grave doesn’t want us here any longer. There is one thing that I don’t understand. In my dream there was not one stone circle here, but two.’

‘Yes,’ said Laura, once more relieved. ‘Yes, there must have been. I myself have read about them, but only two of the outer circle remain and the theory is that a later wave of people did a certain amount of alteration here to make the site possible for the celebration of their own religious rites. They may have been the tribe which made that chambered tomb. It’s obviously later than the rest of the set-up and it’s possible that its guardian stone was set up when the tomb was made, and not earlier. Can you see what I mean about an outer circle? Let your eye travel from that single stone at the north-north-east, which most people think is part of the main avenue. It isn’t. If you follow round between the first and second stones of the eastern arm of the cross, and, keeping the same distance outside that ring which is still standing, you should be able to pick up another solitary stone to the west of the unfinished south avenue. Got it?’

‘Yes, and that explains my dream. And now as you say, we must go. I’d love to come here again and, I’ve shed all my fears. I’m thankful, too, that Stewart isn’t with me.’

On the drive to Arnol Laura wondered whether the girl had told the truth about not wishing for Stewart’s company. If Capella was in love and her feelings were reciprocated, puzzling dreams of death and a dual personality would soon

be half-submerged memories, she thought.

Capella said, but not to anyone in particular, 'Well, I'm also thankful we have shed our interloper. There certainly was no sign of anybody flitting from stone to stone at Callanish. Stewart teased me about it, but Sister Veronica saw it, too.'

'Odd business, that,' said Laura. 'I heard about it from him and also from Catherine, and, if anything could be said about that redoubtable lady's attitude to the rumours, I'd say they made her very uneasy indeed.'

'She did not tell you, I suppose, that she, too, had seen our extra member?' said Dame Beatrice.

'No,' Laura replied, 'she did not claim to have seen anything except one or two other legitimate visitors like ourselves, but she said she had heard the stories and she even hinted that if our party had been augmented on one or two occasions she could make a guess at the identity of the interloper. All this came out before her Truth Game paper was stolen.'

'If anybody had said anything to Catherine,' observed Dame Beatrice, 'it would have been the mischievous Stewart, I suppose.'

'If there was any living person who had attached herself to our party, Professor Owen would have seen her, I think,' said Capella.

'Her?' said Laura. 'You said you did not know whether whatever you saw was male or female.'

'What I saw was an apparition,' said Capella in a slightly higher tone than was usual with her. 'Whoever it was, it was alive in its own sphere, but that sphere is not ours. I don't know why I am suddenly sure it was a woman I saw.'

The road to Arnol skirted Loch Roag again and passed or crossed some small inland lochs, then swung away from the coast at Carloway and proceeded north-eastwards until it almost met the open sea again. Then there were more inland lochs, the River Arnol and then the village itself and its Black House, relic of a more primitive age but one almost within living memory.

It was a long, low, thatched structure, black on the outside, as its name implied, and almost equally black within. They were not the only visitors. A coach-party had arrived just before them, and there was much talking, laughter, clicking of cameras and people going in by the doorway where sat the custodian collecting the small entrance fees, while other people were coming out by a side gate from a small compound.

'Glad this mob weren't at Callanish,' said Laura to Capella. 'Are you coming inside?'

‘Oh, yes, I suppose so. I don’t see a sign of any window. It’s probably as black as pitch.’

‘I understand that the house is in the hands of the Scottish National Trust,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘so that ensures that it will be well maintained. It is much larger than I would have supposed.’

‘They had to accommodate the domestic animals — sheep, I suppose — as well as themselves,’ said Laura.

‘It’s a spooky-looking place,’ said Capella nervously. ‘I’m glad there are so many people about.’

‘*Nach eil tannasgan agaibh anna an tigh-òsda?*’ asked Laura conceitedly and, considering that her hearers had no Gaelic, inexcusably. Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘You will have to translate for the benefit of the ignorant,’ she said. Laura glanced at Capella, laughed, apologised, and said, ‘Not until we’ve been inside, if you don’t mind. Then maybe I will have *cuspair oraide*, and *that* means *material for a lecture*.’ They moved towards the entrance and, Laura leading and with Capella hard on her heels and Dame Beatrice, who had lingered a little, bringing up the rear, they entered the long, dark interior.

Apart from the black outside walls, built mainly of turf, the blackness within no doubt contributed to the appellation of the house, for certainly there were no windows and, except for a solitary candle-lantern, there was no light except for the dull glow of a peat fire which was burning in the middle of the hard clay floor of what must have been the family living-room. The smoke, of which, probably owing to experienced stoking by the custodian, there was very little, escaped through an aperture in the roof, but this was not visible, so whether it was a simple small hole or the more sophisticated *louvre* to be seen in English mediaeval halls before the introduction of wall fireplaces, none of them knew.

There were beds in alcoves, but the furnishings were of the simplest kind and the objects on view, as the visitors’ eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the more than semi-darkness, were few and of the most basic, necessary kind.

They went through an opening into what had been the roofed and walled space devoted to wintering the one or two domestic animals, and from it there was a door which led into the compound. They blinked in the sunshine and gratefully breathed the fresh, tangy, sea-scented air.

‘One of the children was crying,’ said Capella, as they walked to where they had parked the car.

‘There weren’t any children,’ said Laura, waving as, with fluttering hands

and what she referred to as ‘wreathed smiles’ the coach-party moved off. ‘That’s one of these jamborees they call ‘an extended tour’. Comes from Exeter, like ourselves. You wouldn’t find children on a sight-seeing trip of that kind. Not the sort of holiday for kids at all.’

‘I didn’t mean coach-party children. I meant one of the children in that wall-bed inside the Black House. I think she was hungry. I expect the people who lived there were poor.’

‘Come, come!’ said Laura. ‘The children in the wall-bed were dummies, although realistic, I admit. You mean *you’re* hungry. I could do with my lunch myself. Dame B. calls *me* imaginative, but that was before she met *you*!’

Chapter 10

MOONLIGHT, MURDER AND LOVE

‘Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body’s end?’
William Shakespeare



What do you really make of young Capella and her dreams and hauntings?’ asked Laura, going in to say goodnight to Dame Beatrice before joining her room-mate. Dame Beatrice shrugged.

‘She was probably a precocious child who, whether with or without the knowledge of her parents, read indigestible matter at too early an age.’

‘You think she read all that stuff her papa wrote?’

‘I think it is more than likely.’

‘So what about Sister Veronica?’

‘I know. It is puzzling. I wonder whether they see the same figure flitting from stone to stone?’

‘I hadn’t thought of that. I took it for granted that they did.’

‘Unlikely, I think, but neither seems to have had more than fleeting glimpses of this flitting figure, and so we have not been able to get a detailed descriptionn of it. Incidentally, I suppose you noticed that it was not until Sister Veronica mentioned it that Capella claimed to have seen it.’

‘You’ve given up the idea that it is a real person, then?’

‘As I believe I have said before, if it were flesh and blood, as the saying goes, others of the party must surely have obtained a glimpse of it. Capella, of course, is open to any suggestion which involves the occult.’

‘But you don’t believe in ghosts, do you?’

‘I prefer to say that I have never seen one and I do not suppose I ever shall. As for not believing in them, well, as in the case of the Loch Ness monster, there is too much reliable evidence for anybody to ignore.’

‘I suppose the same is true of unidentified flying objects and the odd things that happen in the Bermuda Triangle. Well, I’d better join my stable-companion or I shall be having bad dreams if we stay talking about these things. What are we doing tomorrow?’

‘I believe there are some very fine beaches. It would be a pity to leave the island without seeing a little more of it.’

‘I’ll tell you one thing I *would* like to do, but only if you’ll come along, too. I’d love to visit Callanish by moonlight, but I should hate to go alone.’

‘The stones by moonlight would be well worth seeing. I don’t know whether Capella ought to go with us, though. She is highly sensitive and nervous.’

‘She has lost her superstitious fears of the stones. If she wants to go I think it

would be all right. After all, she's old enough to make up her own mind.'

'Old enough and wise enough are not synonymous terms. However, the chances are that she will decide not to join us.'

Laura told Capella of the project next day as they sat on the beautiful Garry sands a few miles north of Stornoway. Here and there when the tide was out, rocks broke the expanses of the golden beach. The long arm of Tolsta Head reached out to sea and the massive stacks of rocky cliff had holes and caves accessible at low tide.

Very much to her surprise, Capella appeared to relish the idea of a moonlight visit to Callanish.

'That really would dispose of my dream once and for all,' she said, 'and it would be a thrilling experience, anyway. When do we go?'

'It depends on Dame B., but we're having a very lazy day, so I should think it will be tonight.'

They returned to Stornoway, drove along the Eye peninsula and then, returning, Laura took the north-west road to Port of Ness where there was another fine sandy beach, although the cliffs were less spectacular than those of Garry, and they spent another lazy hour.

'Do you think it was a case of thought transference?' asked Laura that evening when she had tapped at Dame Beatrice's door to find out whether her employer was ready to go down to dinner. 'I mean, I had hardly breathed a word to her about seeing the stones by moonlight when she came right out with it and talked about its disposing of her dream and all that.'

'Interesting,' said Dame Beatrice, ignoring the reference to thought transference. 'Well, that disposes of any doubts I had about taking her with us.'

It was in the half-light that they set out after dinner. Westward of the town Laura drove at a very moderate pace. The moorland roads were unfenced and, although during the daylight journey she had noticed no straying animals, she was taking no chances, for she had nothing but the headlights to guide her, except for a glow from an occasional croft cottage or house and these lay back from the road.

The sky was heavy and the moonlight was fitful. The moon seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-seek as it appeared and disappeared, now swimming in a clear lift of sky, then making luminous a small, light patch of thin cloud and often disappearing altogether behind the heavier nightwrack.

It was ten o'clock or so when Laura, hoping she had remembered the junction correctly, turned off on to the narrow track which led to the stones. She

pulled up as the moon decided to reveal them, and there they stood in their stark avenues and in their circle of inscrutable magic, mute witnesses to who knows what strange primitive rituals enacted before recorded time.

They loomed, black and menacing, the silent guardians of an age which for countless centuries had passed from men's minds and which could never, even with all the resources of modern scholarship and technology, be revived and recreated. The stones by day had been grey and thin and had borne evidence of the five feet of peat which had deposited itself around them until it was dug out when the now-non-existent cairn had been excavated to reveal the small passage-grave inside the stone circle. Now, however, in the shifting, treacherous moonlight, the stones looked black, seeming taller and heavier than by day, and the pattern they made seemed more meaningful and sinister, the impression being that of tall warriors, hooded, cloaked and watchful, keeping menacing guard and ward, not over the little grave, sufficiently guarded by the tall and lonely monolith which stood nearest to it, but over something which was going on in the stone circle, something so pagan and yet so holy that even the guardians kept themselves hooded in the presence of those mysterious rites.

The three women left the car and stood and gazed at the scene. Then Dame Beatrice took the path which led to a wicket gate and from this she walked into the main avenue of stones and approached the stone circle. Capella and Laura took the slightly longer way and traversed the whole of the main avenue.

As they approached the circle of stones which surrounded the grave, Capella said, 'I had that dream again last night. I ought not to have come. If I went round and touched every stone, do you think it would go away and never come back?'

'You sound like a kid of ten,' said Laura. 'I suppose, when you *were* ten you took care never to tread on the lines that marked off the paving stones. Now *I* never walk widdershins round a church. We all have our little fancies.'

'Perhaps if I went and stood on the knoll at the end there, where I stood in my dream,' said Capella, 'that might work. Will you come with me?'

'If you like. Hullo, what's Dame B. up to?'

Dame Beatrice had reached the centre of the stone circle. The moon, which, riding high, had swum behind some light clouds and turned them to warm silver, swam out again and caused the tall black stones to cast even blacker shadows.

Where Dame Beatrice stood there seemed to be another shadow. It was across the tiny chambers of the open tomb and Laura was quick to realise that it was not cast by one of the stones. Leaving Capella's side, she went across to it. Dame Beatrice heard her and turned round.

‘Keep Capella away,’ she said, but it was too late. Capella came bounding towards them, caught her foot and fell flat on her face. Laura picked her up, but she had already seen what the strange shadow was.

‘I knew it,’ she said, holding on to Laura. It’s the body I saw in my dream, isn’t it? It’s that flitting ghost at Castlerigg.’

Dame Beatrice was on her knees. She looked round and said, ‘I thought it might be a tramp sleeping out, but it isn’t. It is a woman and I think she is dead. Go back to the car, Laura, and bring me the big torch you keep there. And you, Capella, stay where you are, or go with Laura and sit in the car.’

Capella accompanied Laura, but they did not say anything to one another as they hurried along. Laura went back with the torch. Dame Beatrice took it and again knelt beside the body. When she got up and handed back the torch she said, ‘Her skull is crushed. One might almost suppose that one of the stones had toppled over and killed her. Would it distress you too much to take a look? I may need a witness. She was first strangled, then struck.’

Laura came forward and took the torch. The woman lay face upward, so that the dreadful head-wound was not visible. The feet were neatly side by side and the arms were so straight that they might almost have been clamped to the body. The eyes were wide open, as though in shocked surprise and were staring straight up at the sky. This had cleared again, and Laura got a good look at the suffused face. Silently they returned to Capella and the car, and when the car left the trackway and took the road for Stornoway, the unknown dead and the primitive grave, the tall, stark, terrifying stones and the gently-washed shores of Loch Roag were left to the night-winds, the silence, and the fugitive dances of the clouds, the stars and the moon.

‘Nobody we know, thank goodness,’ said Laura when they reached the town.

The police officer who called at the hotel on the following morning was quietly-spoken, very polite, and obviously embarrassed.

‘No body?’ said Dame Beatrice, when he had made his apologetic explanation. ‘Well, there was certainly a body there at half-past ten last night. I have two witnesses.’

Capella, who had seen enough to qualify her as a witness, came forward and testified to having seen the body. Laura followed suit and was able to be more explicit. The tall, dark, thin policeman scratched his jaw.

‘It was night and it was often overcast,’ he said. ‘Do you not think that in such a place, and at night, the shadows or some such deceived you? It is not a part of the island that I myself would care to be visiting at such a time except in

the course of my duty. I went there with my men and we took strong lighting. I declare to you that if there had been anything there we must surely have seen it. Will you not agree that some trick of the moonlight and the weird nature of the place had you deceived?’

‘No,’ Dame Beatrice replied, ‘we were not deceived. There was a woman’s body, she had first been strangled and then knocked on the head. If it has been moved from where we saw it, I suggest that you find out where her body has been hidden.’

The officer departed, shaking his head.

‘One thing,’ said Laura, ‘this is a bit of goose for us in a way. As they don’t believe us, there’s nothing to keep us from driving down to Tarbert and catching the next ferry to Uig, as we planned to do. It’s not as though the dead woman was a member of our party, or anything awkward like that. We’ve done all we could. If they choose to doubt us there’s nothing more we can do. We’ve left our names and our home addresses. It’s up to them now.’

‘I shall be glad to leave this place,’ said Capella. ‘I don’t like dreams that come true.’

‘Anyway, it wasn’t you who was lying across the grave,’ said Laura robustly, ‘so it wasn’t a dream come true. It was just one of those things. Let’s forget about it and enjoy the rest of the trip.’

They dropped the subject, but while Capella had gone to ask the hotel porter to bring down the luggage, Laura said to Dame Beatrice, ‘The murderer must have been in hiding somewhere and spotted us. Not the most entrancing of thoughts, what?’

‘He must have had a car or some means of transport, unless he lives near the Stones. I saw no car except our own. Did you?’

‘If he hid a car in the shadow of an abandoned croft cottage, there are plenty of those old, decaying dwellings still left standing, or even behind somebody’s pile of turf outside one of those houses near the stones — after all, Callanish is a village and not far off—we should never have noticed. Our own car was right out in the open, so the murderer would have spotted it and, in any case, would have spotted us. He must have done, otherwise he would never have moved the body. He had quite a bit of time to find somewhere to hide it between when we left and when the police came along.’

‘A fact which, in spite of their attitude of kindly disbelief, will have communicated itself to them, but, as you say, there is no reason for us to change our plans. We will spend three days on your beloved island of Skye, keeping

Capella with us, and then, by easy stages, make our way home.'

'It's not easy to see why the murderer felt it necessary to move the body,' said Laura, thinking aloud. 'It's not as though we were likely to recognise it, yet the inference is that he wouldn't have moved it if we hadn't come along. That's another thing: he couldn't have thought that visitors to the Stones would be there at that time of night. What was he doing hanging about the place? Having dumped the body, you'd think his instinct would be to scarper and put as much distance as he could between the corpse and himself in whatever time he had at his disposal.'

'One would think so, but no doubt he had his reasons. He may have laid out the body only just before we arrived, and I do not think murdered her very long before that. The corpse was cold, but *rigor mortis*, which, as you know, sets in, beginning with the face, five to seven hours after death, was not present. That much I was able to ascertain and my evidence, which is not likely to be disregarded, is at the disposal of the island police if and when they ask for it. Apart from that, it might be as well to confide in dear Robert, your husband. He will know whether we ought to carry the affair any further. I hardly think we ourselves should take any definite steps. I have every confidence that the island police will find the body and then all can be left to them.'

'I suppose,' said Laura tentatively, 'it wasn't a bit strange that young Capella should have chosen to go with us to look at the Stones at night?'

'In the late evening. It was hardly night. You imply?'

'Well, the body was there. Could she have known that we should find it? She took jolly good care not to be the first one of us to look at the grave.'

'Your suggestion does credit to your imagination.'

'No need to jibe. She was anxious enough to look at the corpse after she knew we had seen it.'

'At any rate, she could not have committed the murder.'

'But you think she may know who did?'

'She may guess. She related the body to that woman she is supposed to have been. Let us make a dignified departure and continue the conversation later.'

They were soon out of the town and heading south for Tarbert on Harris and the ferry to Uig. The crossing this time was enjoyable. Out from Tarbert there were islands large and small, some mere rocks. The chain ended with Scalpay, guarded on the west side by its own group of tiny islands and bounded to the north by a long stretch of the coast of Harris. The landscape was crowned by the thousand-foot peak of Uiseval, which the travellers had seen from the road as

they came through.

Capella joined Laura at the rail of the ship.

‘Lovely, isn’t it?’ she said.

‘And a shorter sea-trip than the outward one,’ said Laura. ‘I wonder,’ she added, struck by a sudden thought, ‘what the rest of our lot got up to in Inverness?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, that sudden change of plan was a bit strange. In the letter of invitation which came for Dame B. and myself, Owen specifically mentioned Callanish and Arran as the star attractions, yet he himself and five others settled for Kilmartin instead of Arran, and now only the three of us opted for Callanish. Three others opted out altogether and have gone home, and Stewart, Owen and the nuns have settled for Clava.’

‘What of it? People can change their minds.’

‘Not when a murdered body is found at a place to which seven out of ten of the party have decided not to go. A bit fishy, that, and in my experience (as the boy of eleven said at a children’s Brains Trust when some funny idiot in the audience asked a question about divorce), in *my* experience, things which are fishy are apt to smell very nasty after a period of time.’

‘You are not suggesting that one of our party murdered that woman, are you?’

‘No, of course not, but you did say you recognised the body as that of somebody you had spotted trailing our lot around the stone circles.’

‘But we left her behind in Cumbria. Nobody saw her on Arran or at Kilmartin.’

‘And why not? I’ll tell you. You and Sister V. are the only ones who claim to have seen her. She didn’t appear to either of you on Arran, although those circles at noonday on Machrie Moor were spooky enough to encourage any ghostly visitant. Did you know that the most terrifying ghosts are not those seen by night? The really dreadful ones seem to be like mad dogs and Englishmen; they go out in the noonday sun.’

‘Are you trying to frighten me, Laura?’

‘No, of course not. Just pulling your leg.’

‘So what have Arran and Kilmartin to do with it?’

‘Plenty. If your flitting figure didn’t turn up on Machrie Moor it isn’t you who is being haunted, neither is it Sister Veronica.’

‘Nobody saw it at Kilmartin, either, but perhaps nobody there was capable of

seeing ghosts. Laura, on a different matter, what do you think is the matter with Stewart? He was — well, you know — ’

‘All over you to begin with, and then he went to Kilmartin instead of Arran and stayed in Inverness instead of coming with you to Stornoway? Yes, I know.’

‘It makes me feel rather a fool.’

‘Oh, nonsense! These blow-hot, blow-cold merchants have to be taken as you find them. I certainly wouldn’t lose any sleep over that one if I were you.’

‘Clarissa told me he was with Catherine all the time at Kilmartin.’

‘So why should you worry?’

‘She’s very beautiful, Laura.’

‘And the coldest fish that ever leaped out of the sea.’

‘I’ve never had a lover.’

‘Lucky you!’

‘Men at the university, but never anybody special.’

‘You’ve plenty of time. As for Stewart, forget him.’

‘You think he is just a playboy, don’t you?’

‘Good gracious, no. I think he’s got a single-track mind and the track it’s on at present is this thesis of his. When he needed somebody to listen to his theories he chose you, but my guess is that you may have proved too knowledgeable to suit him. He wanted a pupil, a disciple, not a fellow-student and an equal. I expect he had a most satisfying time at Kilmartin instructing the ignorant.’

‘Would you call Catherine ignorant?’

‘On the subject of stone circles, yes. She’s a careers mistress at her school and an amateur novelist in her spare time. The really important things in life would pass her by.’

‘I wonder why she came on the tour?’

‘Why did any of us come?’

‘I’ve always been interested in stone circles ever since my father took us to look at them when I was a child.’

‘And what do you think you are now? Just out of the egg or still emerging?’

‘You’re a great comfort to me, Laura. Are you happily married?’

‘Yes, thanks, very, but I should have been happy anyway, being constructed along those lines. I regard marriage as something to be taken in one’s stride. It’s like passing exams. Either you do or you don’t, and those who don’t often make a great deal more money than those who do.’

‘Would you call Stewart a mercenary man?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Clarissa told me she thinks Catherine has money.’

‘Against that, Catherine is years older than Stewart. She must be well turned thirty.’

‘You really *are* a great comfort, Laura. It’s the mother in you, I suppose.’

Laura laughed. They leaned on the ship’s rail, elbow to elbow, and watched the solid flow of the water as it rushed past the ship’s side below them.

Chapter 11

THE ROLLRIGHT STONES

‘Nor hast thou undergone the rites
That fit thee to partake the mystery.’

Robert Southey



The trip homeward was leisurely. No further reference was made to the body at Callanish, although no doubt it was at the back of all three minds. The party spent three nights on Skye, after driving from Uig to Kyleakin. There they put up at a hotel and made excursions to Dunvegan, Flora MacDonald's grave, the Cuillins and the beautiful seascapes of Isleornsay, and Capella saw her first golden eagle.

They left Skye for Fort William, then spent a night at the hotel at Renfrew Airport and another in Chester and then were well on their homeward way. When they were by-passing Worcester before diverging from the motorway on to the road for Pershore and Burford, Capella said, 'Would it take you too far out of your way if we went to Chipping Norton to look at the Rollright Stones? I'd love to see them again.'

'Nothing easier,' said Laura. 'We're dropping you in north Oxford, anyway, and Dame B. and I are going to stay the night in Oxford. You said "again". Have you seen them before?'

'Yes, when I was twelve. I made a foolish, childish promise which I think I ought to retract, and I can only do it in the presence of the King Stone and the Whispering Knights.'

'Young Fernanda Grey had to do it in the Confessional,' said Laura. 'Yours sounds far more romantic. I made a promise myself once.'

'What did Fernanda Grey promise?'

'Oh, long before she had reached the age of puberty she vowed herself to perpetual virginity. Later on, she decided she'd been a bit premature.'

'And what was your promise?'

'To abstain from all intoxicating liquors as beverages,' said Laura.

'What a tactful way of putting it!' said Dame Beatrice. 'Talking of literary allusions, as Laura's reference to *Frost in May* seems to indicate that we are doing, I am reminded of Jenny Diver, who never drank what she termed "strong waters" unless she had the colic.'

'To which Macheath responded that she did but follow the example of what *he* called "the fine ladies",' said Laura; 'and I quote: "Why, a lady of quality is never without the colic." Anyway,' she added, 'I sat next to an eminent doctor once at a public dinner, and he told me that there is only one real tonic in the world, and that is whisky.'

After Pershore they branched off at Moreton-in-the-Marsh for Chipping Norton. There was little traffic about, in spite of its being the holiday season, and when they got to Little Rollright and went on to the well-signposted Stones, they found that they had the site to themselves. There were two large lay-bys for cars, and the site, which was on private property, was fenced around by a palisade of wood reinforced by barbed wire. There was a hedge, too, between the visitors and the stone circle, but an entrance had been provided and from this the visitors were able to get an impression of an almost complete ring of stones, some of them so close together that they seemed to be touching one another. Some were tall and were silhouetted against the upland sky; others were almost hidden in the grass.

On one side of the enclosure there was a copse of deciduous trees amongst which the custodian's hut of brick and wood was discreetly camouflaged; on the other side was a straggle of conifers. A small wooden table near the entrance supported a plastic bag which held leaflets giving information about the site, and beside the bag was a pickle-jar to hold the modest entrance fees paid by the visitors and the money obtained from the sale of postcards.

A woman came out of the hut bringing the postcards for display. She greeted the visitors, took their money and laid out the picture postcards. One of these was an excellent colour photograph of the greater part of the circle of stones flanked by the ragged fir-trees; on the cover of the leaflet was a reproduction of an engraving made in 1607 from Camden's *Britannia*. Another card showed a shepherd with dog, crook and basket, seated on a low bank with the Whispering Knights leaning together in the background; a third card, copied from a drawing made in about 1870, strangely showed the conifers forming their own incongruous circle inside the circle of stones.

An unexpected addition to the *Britannia* engraving was a windmill. Equally unexpected, and more endearing, was the presence in real life of two white goats which were peacefully grazing in the middle of the stone circle, oblivious of the presence of the three visitors who had now entered the enclosure.

Capella looked at the weather-beaten stones with a kind of horror. She had not remembered from her previous visit how unkindly the elements had dealt with them. Their surfaces were pitted and pock-marked and there was not much doubt that many of the smaller stones had not formed part of the original circle, but were chunks which had fallen from larger stones. Capella, standing in front of a tall, particularly scabrous-looking pillar of oolitic limestone, said, with dramatic emphasis, 'They look like lepers!'

Laura went back to the custodian, bought another set of cards which she thought her son would like, and pointed to where, some distance off, she could see another group of stones.

‘How do we get to those?’ she asked.

‘The Whispering Knights? Well, there is no direct access from here because of the fencing. You will have to go back to the road, turn right and a little way further up there is a path alongside a barley field. The King Stone is on the other side of the road. The owner had to fence in the monuments because insensitive people used to chip pieces off the stones and keep them for luck. It wasn’t deliberate vandalism, but, of course, it had to be stopped, so you’ll find that the King and the Knights have iron railings round them.’

‘Luck?’ said Capella, who had joined Laura. ‘I should think it would be more likely to bring a curse. Don’t people realise that these circles were temples? You might as well chip bits off a cathedral.’

‘I daresay that has been done before now,’ said Laura. They returned to Dame Beatrice, who was in contemplation of a solitary, massive, squat-looking stone which was not only apart from any other, for some of the stones formed clumps, but gave an impression of malformed, human malignancy.

‘It is not difficult to believe that this is a man turned to stone, as legend suggests,’ she said.

‘The circle is supposed to represent the king’s men,’ said Capella. ‘This one clearly shows how the story came to be told. You can see the shape of a head inclined towards the right shoulder. He has long hair and you can make out both his arms. He looks as though he has fallen asleep on duty.’ She stepped forward and touched the rough surface.

‘You’re too fanciful by half,’ said Laura. ‘I like the way he stands out, though, against those bushes and trees.’ She took one of the postcards she had bought and made a quick sketch on the back of it before she continued her circuit.

‘I had forgotten how to get to the Knights,’ said Capella. ‘In fact, I’d forgotten most things about this place.’

They found the King Stone first. It was on the left-hand side of the road and they had to cross a stile which was plainly labelled *Private Property*. The misshapen monolithic outlier behind its protective barrier of iron, spike-topped railings, stood on pasture-land. The day was fine and the sky blue, but there was cumulus cloud behind the rise on which the stone had been erected, and, against it, the King, grimly aggressive, seemed to be rearing his massive form in

defiance of the treachery he suspected.

Capella went up to the railings, held on to them with both hands and, in a low voice which barely reached the other two, she solemnly took back her oath. Nobody else said anything. All three returned to the road and only Laura turned at the stile to look back at the solitary stone.

‘I wonder what was the point of these outliers,’ she said. ‘Most of the circles seem to have one. Pointers of some sort, I suppose. There was Long Meg...’

‘What there wasn’t here, any more than at Callanish,’ said Capella, ‘was anybody dodging about behind the stones.’

‘Many of them were not tall enough to act as a screen,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but I am glad that your spectre has been laid.’

‘You didn’t see it until Sister Veronica mentioned it, did you?’ said Laura, pressing a point she had made before.

‘Perhaps not, but I *did* see it and I *did* know there would be a body in a rectangular enclosure, didn’t I?’

They took the narrow path alongside a big field of barley and Laura, who felt that perhaps she should not have spoken so bluntly, changed the subject by remarking that she supposed barley had been grown on the field for generations and that would account for the windmill in the engraving.

‘The two charming but unresponsive goats we saw grazing inside the stone circle might account for the shepherd at a time when the goats would have been replaced by sheep,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘The Whispering Knights,’ she said, as they came near to the iron railings which enclosed the five large stones, ‘do indeed appear to be in a conspiratorial huddle.’

Three of the Knights were still standing. The other two had fallen. The group was a formation of later date than the King Stone and the stone circle. It was a Bronze Age burial chamber, but it was rendered less impressive than it might have been, owing to the presence of a large, bulging sack which had been placed conspicuously on a space of rough grass, so that it lay between the upright and the fallen stones and, like them, was inside the iron railings.

‘Wonder what that’s doing there?’ said Laura. ‘Could it be a sack of barley put there as a pagan offering, do you think? Old superstitions die hard.’

‘Barley wouldn’t bulge in various places like that,’ said Capella. ‘It’s probably some witchcraft thing. My father says that modern witches use some of the stone circles for their rites and it’s known that the local people still visit the circles secretly because there’s a superstition that the stones mustn’t be neglected. There is still some sort of pagan cult connected with them.’

‘I wonder whether the custodian knows that the sack is there,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘The stone circle and her hut are some distance off, so I doubt whether she pays many visits to the Knights.’

‘I expect the sack is full of rubbish some vandals have chucked over the railings,’ said Laura, ‘and it does spoil the effect. I certainly think we ought to report it at the hut on our way back.’

Dame Beatrice said nothing, but she went nearer the railings. The three tall standing-stones, leaning towards one another as though in conclave, traitorous or otherwise, stood out sharply against the distant blue of hills, and the sack certainly did not enhance their static dignity. Laura took out the postcard which showed the engraving of the Knights and behind the seated shepherd in the picture she lightly pencilled in the outline of the sack.

They retraced their steps, skirting the barley field again and then followed the road.

‘I noticed that you can see the circle from the King Stone,’ said Capella.

‘Well, he would want to keep an eye on his men, I suppose,’ said Laura flippantly.

At the hut they had to wait for a minute or two while another party of sightseers was admitted. Dame Beatrice waited while the custodian took the money and displayed the postcards and then said, ‘There is a large sack in the enclosure of the Whispering Knights. I don’t know whether it is supposed to be there, but we thought we ought to mention it in case you don’t know about it.’

‘A sack? Oh, I’ll tell them up at the house. I have no idea whether it ought to be there, but I shouldn’t think so. I’m only a stand-in, you see, while the other one is on holiday, and I should not bother to go over to the Knights unless I thought people were behaving badly, but, so far, I’ve had no trouble at all. I believe, though, that there has been some bother about litter thrown over into the fields by passing motorists, so thank you for mentioning the sack. I’ll let the owner know.’

When they had returned to the lay-by and the car and were on the way to Woodstock and Oxford, Laura said, ‘Why we were all so worried about that sack I can’t imagine. It was nothing to do with us.’

‘It was an incongruity and the incongruous is always interesting and puzzling,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I hardly think the owner of the property put the sack there.’

‘Well, I hope it isn’t a case of the body in the bag, ta-rah-rah!’ said Laura.

‘I hope so, too. To have left one body behind us may be excusable; to leave

two, as Lady Bracknell said of Ernest Worthing's lost parents, looks like carelessness.'

Nobody spoke for a while. Then Capella said:

'It *could* have been a body.'

'Probably a sheep or a dog which somebody had run over and didn't want to report, then,' said Laura. 'It would be too much of a coincidence if the three of us found two bodies within the space of a few days and both of them lying in prehistoric graves.'

'Graves?' said Capella. 'Oh, yes, of course. The Knights are the ruins of a burial chamber and the Callanish woman was lying across the remains of a chambered tomb. I knew how it would be. I *said* I knew. It wasn't coincidence. It had to happen and I had to be there when the bodies were found.'

'I wonder whether that first body *will* be found,' said Laura. 'The police were pretty sceptical when they went along to Callanish and it wasn't where we had said it was. If we had been men they might have believed us, but, although they were polite, I think they wrote us off as three fanciful women whose eyes played tricks in the moonlight.'

'I think they will look for the body,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Whether they will find it is another matter. It depends upon how thorough the search is and how well the murderer knows the island.'

'Now I come to think things over,' said Laura, 'I can see a nasty sense of humour behind all this. Capella has had a lot to say about bodies lying inside rectangles and I wouldn't be surprised if somebody has taken her up on it.'

'But that would mean that somebody in our party is a murderer!' said Capella.

'I know. Think it over,' said Laura.

Chapter 12

INVESTIGATION, LIKE CHARITY, BEGINS AT HOME

‘... not being a person who contrived or actually committed the murder, who shall give such information and evidence as shall lead to the discovery and conviction of the person or persons who committed the murder.’

Police Notice in connection with the murder of Mary Jane Kelly, presumably by Jack the Ripper.



They dropped Capella at her father's house in the Woodstock Road in north Oxford, spent the night at the Clarendon and returned to the Stone House on the edge of the New Forest in time for lunch next day. Dame Beatrice had rung up from Oxford on the previous evening, so she was not surprised when, having inserted her key in the front door and opened it, she and Laura were met in the hall by an excited French servant. She had not rushed out from the kitchen merely to welcome them home, however, although this came first. Then she burst dramatically into her news.

The police, it seemed, had rung up not once but many times. Every day for the past — Celestine counted on her fingers — for the past five days the telephone had rung and always the police had been told that Dame Beatrice was still on holiday and was travelling and could not be contacted.

'I have told them, not once, but many times, that Madame disports herself here, there, everywhere and that I have no address I can give them. They must be tranquil, I tell them, until Madame returns.'

'Police?' said Dame Beatrice. 'Oh, dear!'

'What police?' asked Laura.

'From Loos, they say.'

'O Lord! Our Callanish body!' said Laura. 'Oh, well, they'll have to ring again, that's all.'

'What makes you connect Callanish with Loos?' enquired Dame Beatrice.

'Islanders call it The Lews. It's only the English who pronounce it like that lovely little town behind Brighton.'

'Oh, I see. How fortunate that I did not need to refer to the island by name in the presence of its inhabitants! Nothing stamps one as a philistine so soon as a wrong pronunciation in the faces of those who know the right one.'

'Cholmondeley, Marjoribanks, Menzies, Colquhoun, *sine die*, and Prinknash,' said Laura. 'I suppose they have found our body. Let's hope they don't want us to go up to Stornoway to identify it.'

'To identify it? Well, we could hardly be of any real help so far as that is concerned. Neither of us had ever seen the woman before.'

The call, when it came next day, was not a request for them to return to Stornoway. A body had been found washed up on the shores of Loch Roag. All that the police wanted was as detailed a description as they could manage to

supply from memory, of the way the woman had been dressed.

‘So they are pretty sure it isn’t one of their own islanders,’ said Laura, ‘or somebody would have given it a name by now. Besides, I expect that in these days murder is almost unknown up there.’

‘Even murder as a crime of passion?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Love in a cold climate? I wouldn’t know, but if the police are satisfied the dead woman was a tourist they may have the devil of a job tracing where she came from. The ferry we took when we went over there was crowded, and I don’t suppose anybody took any particular notice of any passengers who landed up at Stornoway airport, either.’

‘As I said at the time, she had been dead for a very short time when we found her, but there is nothing, so far, to show how long she had been on the island before she was murdered.’

‘She must have booked accommodation on the island, though. Some hotelier or smallholder will have missed her. How old would you say she was?’

‘Oh, between thirty and forty. I am unwilling to commit myself to a closer estimate than that.’

‘I wonder whether her clothes themselves furnish any clues? Manufacturers label their goods as a rule.’

‘The trouble the police may have to face,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘is that, in these days of mass production, makers’ labels are not of much help. Then, of course, she may not have booked accommodation on the island at all.’

‘Oh, but, surely she must have done!’

‘Not necessarily. I think the chances are that she was murdered before she got to any hotel, boarding establishment or croft. Had I been the murderer, I should most certainly have taken that sort of precaution. As I see it, the murderer and his victim could have come to the island either by sea or by air, the murderer having booked accommodation on the island only for a single visitor — himself. Arrived at Stornoway, he and his victim could have driven off in a car — there must have been a car to get them to Callanish from Stornoway — but instead of going straight to the hotel, or wherever it was that he had booked a room for himself, he could have taken his victim to some remote spot — not a difficult matter, in spite of the number of crofts on the island — strangled her, hit her on the head for good measure, and hidden the body until dusk before dumping it in the stone circle.’

‘Wouldn’t they have had to get a meal somewhere, if they didn’t go straight to a hotel or wherever the woman thought they were going to stay?’

‘With murder planned, I do not think he would have risked having a meal in public. If he did anything, he would have bought simple food and cans of liquid refreshment and arranged a picnic. The important thing was for him not to be seen with the woman after they had left the boat or the aeroplane. He may even have made sure that they did not disembark together. That could easily be managed from a crowded ferry.’

‘But they both had to enter the car, and somebody might have seen them do that.’

‘On a busy quay or at an airport?’

‘Ah, but that’s another thing; they couldn’t have come by air. If he brought his car they must have come over by ferry from Ullapool or Uig, and somebody is sure to have seen them together on the boat. I mean, the victim must have been quite unsuspecting, or she would never have come with him at all, so she would have stuck with him during the crossing.’

‘If they came by boat,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘then Capella’s claim to have recognised the body becomes absolute nonsense.’

‘Well, we’ve been a bit suspicious about her and her flitting spectre all along, haven’t we? But how do you mean about the nonsense?’

‘If Capella really thought she recognised the dead woman — and she could only have done so, one would think, by the way the woman was dressed — that implies some connection in Capella’s mind with our party.’

‘Just one of her irrational fancies. She gets an idea from Sister Veronica that we are being followed around by a spook, she has — or *says* she has — these sightings of dead bodies laid out in rectangles, and when, by what must be the most bizarre of coincidences, we actually come upon a body laid out exactly where she claims to have seen one, of course she thinks she recognises it. Come to that, if we didn’t know it was an impossibility, I might conclude she’d put the body there herself.’

‘Fortunately we *do* know that that is impossible. From Inverness onward the girl was never out of our clutches. You and she even shared a room.’

‘To go back a bit, if we may, you still haven’t explained about the nonsense. What has the boat versus aeroplane to do with it?’

‘We left Professor Owen, Mr. Stewart and the two Sisters in Inverness and, at the time of our own departure, we assume, from what was said, that Miss Catherine, Lionel and Clarissa were on their way to the Border. We had been on the island for so short a time when we came upon the body — a body, I must stress, which was not yet subject to *rigor mortis* — that, if one of our party was

involved, as Capella's declaration surely suggests, that person or those persons must have flown over.'

'Granted. So what?'

'A car was a necessity, whether the woman was dead or alive when the murderer took her to Callanish. He could not have brought a car over by plane.'

'So he hired one when he and the woman landed at Stornoway airport.'

'It sounds a dangerous thing to have done, but murderers do make mistakes and your logic is faultless.'

'But all this only obtains if the murderer is Owen, Stewart, Sister Pascal, (I really *can't* include Sister Veronica), Lionel and/or Clarissa, or Catherine,' said Laura, 'and that's what the nonsense amounts to. Besides, we know the last three were on their way south before we ourselves, with Capella, left Inverness. You have said so.'

'There is an airport at Renfrew, Glasgow, as we know. The flight from there to Inverness takes forty-five minutes, and from Inverness to Stornoway forty minutes, with a short wait of about thirty minutes to change planes.'

'But why choose Lewis for the murder when they all knew *you* were going there?'

'It would not be the first time I have been challenged. There is a certain type of mind which is never happy unless it is trailing its coat.'

'So that's the *real* reason for you to connect the murder with somebody in our party! You know, I still wonder what was in that sack at the Rollright Stones. It's beginning to look dashed sinister.'

Laura had not long to wait. Two days later a report in the newspapers described briefly but sufficiently what had been the contents of the sack. The accounts varied only in the telling. The more serious and responsible journals confined themselves to a laconic statement that the body of a woman judged to be between the ages of thirty and thirty-five had been found in a field on the Oxon-Worcester border. The livelier reports mentioned the sack and the venue in which it had been discovered and followed this up with a suggestion that the old pagan rites had returned to rural England, linking these rites (whatever the reporters thought they may have been) with the desecration of graves by Satanists and with the Druid observances at Stonehenge.

'One would guess at the beginning of the Silly Season,' said Laura, 'except that this is a case of murder.'

During the next two days more detail followed. Separating the sober facts from the merely sensational guesses, the reports boiled down to these: the body

when found had been completely clothed; the death had been brought about by strangulation, probably with a ligature of some kind, followed by a blow on the head, and there were signs that a ring had been wrenched from the left hand of the corpse, the third finger of which had been broken.

‘It looks as though we have work to do,’ said Laura. ‘The police, according to the last report I read, are appealing for three ladies, one elderly, one middle-aged and one young, who actually saw the sack *in situ* and reported it. They are asked to get in contact with their local police-station. That means us, from the description, I’m afraid. To think that I should live to see myself described in print as being middle-aged! *Is truagh mo chàradh!*’

‘Mine, too.’

‘How come you knew I meant “Mine is a sad case”, when you don’t know a word of Gaelic?’

‘I study to improve, and I have been delving into the admirable John MacKechnie’s *Gaelic Without Groans* which you are good enough to leave on the library table.’

‘Oh, well, be that as it may — although I think you might have left me with *one* advantage over you — do we offer ourselves up at the police station?’

‘No. We are asked to get in contact. We can do that over the telephone. The mountain must come to Mahomet.’

The mountain did so in the form of a smart young police sergeant who took notes and who was succeeded on the following afternoon by the Chief Constable of the County. He was an old friend and greeted Dame Beatrice with simulated astonishment and awe. He was accompanied by a uniformed inspector.

‘Not you again!’ he said. ‘How do you come to be mixed up in this gruesome affair? I suppose you couldn’t perform a miracle and identify this unfortunate woman, could you? The Oxfordshire chaps — oh, this is Inspector Marsh of the County Constabulary — would be no end grateful. They haven’t a clue who she is. They’ve made every enquiry at the Rollright Stones and put out a poster with a photograph on it, but nobody has come forward to identify her, and, not unexpectedly, the owners at Rollright know nothing and certainly do not recognise the photograph.’

‘Then it is most unlikely that Laura or I will be able to do so, but I have a morbid streak in my nature and should like to see what the sack contained.’ She looked at Inspector Marsh interrogatively. ‘The fatal injuries are strangely reminiscent of the murder which took place on Lewis recently.’

He nodded. ‘It’s a bit odd that nobody has come forward in either case,’ he

said. 'It's not as though our body is that of a vagrant or a drop-out. The doctors have done a post-mortem and the woman was healthy, clean (except for the coal-dust which had clung to her from the interior of the sack), well-nourished, well-tended as to hands and feet and (again apart from the coal-dust) her hair was in first-rate condition, too. The Stornoway body appears to have been that of a tourist.'

'There was a report of a missing ring.'

'Yes, from a broken finger. Seems as though somebody was in a great hurry to get the ring off. Either it would have been a means of identifying her, or else the motive behind her death was sheer robbery and the thief took her ring as well as her handbag, her wrist watch (she must have worn one, because the skin around her left wrist is quite white on an otherwise sun-browned forearm) and any other jewellery she may have had on her when she was killed. We have found nothing.'

'Strangulation, but not manual strangulation, I believe, was the cause of death. At least, that is what the newspapers have given us to understand.'

'The doctors say a ligature was used, something in the nature of a thin silk scarf or possibly a stocking or a pair of tights. There are no marks of thumb-prints such as one finds in manual strangulation. As for the ring, although it must have been on the finger which got broken, we doubt whether it was a wedding ring. The woman was certainly a virgin. If she was married, the marriage had never been consummated. Our view is that the ring was most likely an engagement ring, or one worn on that particular finger for sentimental reasons connected with a dead lover or something of that nature.'

'Perhaps the ring wouldn't fit any other of her fingers,' said Laura.

'Ah,' said the inspector. 'Now we never thought of that. Not that it makes any difference. A ring is a ring.'

'So when can we see the body?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'The sooner the better, madam,' said the inspector. 'Do you need transport to Oxford?'

'No, thank you. Perhaps you can meet us somewhere there and conduct us to wherever it is we have to go.'

At the mortuary next day a great and most unpleasant surprise awaited them. In spite of the ravages it had suffered both from the murderer and the dirty sack, the corpse was recognisable enough. It was that of Owen's cousin Catherine, one of their companions on the tour of the stone circles, as Dame Beatrice explained to the Chief Constable in the inspector's presence. The inspector could hardly

have been more gratified.

‘This is a rare bit of luck for us, madam,’ he said, as he escorted them back to their car. ‘Funny that nobody has missed her and come forward, though. She’s been dead for several days. Do you know of anybody with whom we can get in contact?’

‘Oh, yes, but I think the fact that nobody has come forward is very easily explained. She left the tour early because she was due to go over to the United States. She was to lecture there. Presumably her friends have taken it for granted that that is where she is, although they may be surprised that they have not heard from her. Sooner or later, I am sure, they would have been making enquiries. I can put you in touch with her cousin, although I am not certain whether he will be at home. We left him in Inverness to continue his study of stone circles. I could give you the address of the hotel at which we all stayed the night before the party broke up, but, of course, I cannot guarantee that he is still there.’

‘If we might have his home address, madam, no doubt we can get in touch with him wherever he is.’

‘Casting my mind back to a very wet evening in Penrith,’ said Laura, when they were back in the Stone House, ‘a certain thought strikes me.’

‘You are thinking about the Truth Game, a curious and unusual version of which was invented and prepared by Professor Owen. You are thinking about Catherine’s answers and the forgery which was substituted for them. You are wondering about the surmises of Mr. Stewart, who contrived to infiltrate among the more suggestible of the company that my inclusion in the party was for reasons unconnected with either a pleasant, relaxing little holiday or an archaeological expedition to contemplate stone circles.’

‘Well, with two murders extant, it does seem as though he had something on his mind, but I do think he might have hinted to us beforehand that he suspected he might have included a joker in his pack. Owen, I mean.’

‘He would have known that I should have refused his invitation if I had suspected that it had — ’

‘Strings tied to it? Oh, would you have turned it down?’

‘Oh, yes. It would have been quite unethical of me to have accepted such a commission. To be asked to enact the part of a wolf in lamb’s clothing in order that I might devour some unsuspecting, unnamed and possibly innocent biped is unthinkable.’

‘I think Owen soon realised that you weren’t prepared to play ball and so he invented that peculiar version of the Truth Game to give you a hint of his real

purpose in inviting you to join his party.'

'Blinkers may suit some horses, but I prefer an all-round view of the course. If you have your shorthand version with you, perhaps you will read to me again Professor Owen's own answers to his quiz.'

'They didn't convey anything to me when I took them down, and I remember that you made no comment when I read them aloud to you before. He wrote:

'I came on this tour because, as its organiser and leader, it seemed inevitable that I should. If I had not organised the tour I should have been making other and perhaps more fruitful contacts. My secret fear is of making a shot in the dark and missing my target, and my favourite superstition is that witches have lost their power to work black or any other form of magic.'"

'So that's Owen's contribution and I take back all I said,' remarked Laura.

'In what connection?'

'That his answers don't convey anything to me. They do now. I can see that he intended a clear hint to you to get busy and begin doing your stuff.'

'As usual, your imagination is running away with you.'

'Imagination has certainly played its part on this trip. I refer to young Capella and her dead bodies enclosed in rectangles.'

'The sack at the Rollright Stones was not enclosed in a rectangle, but within a circle of iron railings.'

'Are you going to take any further steps?'

'It might be interesting to make a few tentative enquiries. Perhaps I may be of some service after all, although not in the way that Professor Owen anticipated. We will begin with Lionel and Clarissa as, except for the murderer, they appear to have been the last people to see poor Catherine alive.'

Chapter 13

PROFESSOR OWEN

‘Which is the longer, the future still to come,
or the past that has gone by?’

(New English Bible; Apocrypha). 2 Esdras 4 v. 45



The only way to track down Lionel and Clarissa is through Owen,' said Laura. 'He will have the home addresses of all our party, and we have his. He must be back by now.'

'Not necessarily, but call his home on the telephone by all means.'

It turned out that Laura was right. Owen was back and professed himself delighted to be in touch with Dame Beatrice and Laura again, but said that he was devastated by the news of his cousin's death.

'Of course I got in touch with the police as soon as I had the news,' he said, 'but that was rather late in the day — the day before yesterday, as a matter of fact, for I had heard nothing until I arrived home and my housekeeper gave me the details. I have been to see Lionel and Clarissa, but they know nothing, of course. I had to give the police their address. It seemed the only thing to do, since Catherine travelled home with them. They assumed that she had gone off to the United States, as was reasonable enough, I suppose, and were a little hurt that she had neither written nor telephoned before she set off. Give you their address? Oh, certainly. Hold on just a minute while I look it up. Do come and see me when you can spare the time.'

'I think we *will* spare the time,' said Dame Beatrice, when Laura gave her the address and the message. 'There may be one or two points which he can clear up for us and which he has not told the police, who are sure to have been in touch with him by now.'

'Why wouldn't he have told the police what he knows?'

'Oh, only because they did not question him about certain matters and it would not occur to him to offer the information.'

'I thought for a moment you meant that he had been withholding information deliberately.'

'Well, that is always a possibility, of course, although in this case it seems unlikely. Ring him again and say that we hope to be with him at three tomorrow afternoon if he can see us then.'

Owen's residence turned out to be a set of rooms above an antique-dealer's shop in Exeter, but he had his own front door at the side of the shop and opened it himself, explaining that his manservant was on holiday. He ushered them up a steep flight of well-carpeted stairs and into a room which did duty both as a drawing-room and a study, for it contained not only bookcases and a large desk

but also a three-piece suite of furniture comprising two deep armchairs upholstered in velvet and a matching settee long enough to hold three people comfortably. There was a good modern reproduction of a small Chippendale mahogany table with a hinged 'pie-crust' top, the characteristic cabriole legs and ball-and-claw feet. It gave an impression both of elegance and sturdiness. Professor Owen, with his tall, broad-shouldered figure, silvered hair, youthful face and fine hands, conveyed, Dame Beatrice thought, the same impression.

He seated his visitors and then stood in front of the fireplace with his hands clasped behind him and looked enquiringly at Dame Beatrice.

'First,' she said, 'our sympathy. You must have had a great shock.'

Owen released his right hand to finger the black tie he was wearing.

'Yes, indeed,' he said. 'Catherine and I were very close, but it was not by my wish, but was due only to her own persistence, that she came on the tour at all.'

'Oh, really? We understood that, like ourselves, she was invited to join the group.'

'By no means. However, that is immaterial now.'

'Is it? I am not so sure. If she was so anxious to be with you, why did she leave the tour so early?'

'She had begun to find young Stewart's attentions embarrassing.'

'I thought his attentions were reserved for Miss Babbacombe-Starr.'

'I am afraid not. Catherine complained to me that he had made an attempt at Ardrossan to invade her bedroom. He was at her side the whole time, if you remember, at Kilmartin, when he could have gone with Miss Starr to Arran had he chosen to do so, and he could also have accompanied the young lady to Stornoway. Did you enjoy your trip to Lewis?'

'Very much. As a fillip to our experiences there, there was the very strange affair of the vanishing corpse.'

'A vanishing — ?'

'Corpse. Have you heard nothing about that? Oh, well, I daresay you do not look at the more sensational items in the newspaper. Yes, at night we paid our second visit to the fascinating stones at Callanish on the west side of the island, and came upon a newly dead woman of early middle age. We informed the authorities, but when they reached the spot the body had vanished, only to turn up again, it seems, off the shores of Loch Roag.'

'What an extraordinary thing! Is it known who the woman was?'

'The police may have found out by now. When they contacted us she had not been identified. I hope I have served a useful purpose in what I was able to tell

them.'

'What information did you give them?'

'Only that the woman had been dead only a very short time when we found her.'

'Oh, of course, you are a doctor. You would know things like that, I suppose.'

'I know enough to determine whether *rigor mortis* has set in, unreliable guide though it is.'

'But does it not pass off again in the course of time?'

'Yes, it does, but it leaves such tell-tale stainings and other evidence behind it that no medical practitioner, especially one armed with as powerful an electric torch as the one Laura carries in the car, could possibly be deceived. I certainly was not, cursory though my inspection had to be.'

'What do the police suspect? An islanders' vendetta?'

'I hardly think they connect the murder with one of their own people, and neither do I.'

'Oh? You have some reason for saying that, no doubt.'

'Yes, I have, but whether my reason will interest the Scottish authorities I have yet to find out.'

'May one ask...?'

'I am afraid my lips are sealed unless or until the police themselves release the information. I have revealed to them that I have official standing with our Home Office, you see.'

'Really? I had no idea of that or had I? Naturally, you must be discretion itself. You mean that nobody is in your confidence?'

'My dear professor, one of the things my dabblings in criminology have taught me is that there is nothing more dangerous than the possession of exclusive information. I meant that I have no idea what use the Scottish authorities will make of such clues as I was able to give them; I did not mean that I had not passed on such information as I had.'

'Oh, I see. Yes, I did misunderstand you. But surely the fact that the woman had been dead only a short while could not help the police very much.'

'Professor, you are fishing. Let me come to the reason for my paying you this visit. At risk of offending you, I must repeat my question, since I am convinced that your answer to it may well have been the truth, but feminine intuition, or whatever the male sex may choose to call it, urges me to suspect that it was not the whole truth.'

Owen smiled and seated himself opposite her.

‘I would not put it down to feminine intuition,’ he said, ‘but to experience gained in the practice of your profession as a psychiatrist. I suppose your patients, even the voluntary ones, do attempt to keep things from you.’

‘Almost invariably, especially at the beginning of the treatment. I want to know the real reason for your cousin’s having given up the tour at so comparatively early a date. Surely a woman of her age and experience could manage an unruly young lover.’

‘I don’t believe Catherine had had that kind of experience, Dame Beatrice. Well, you have challenged me, so, as the saying is, I’ll come clean. She and I had fallen out a little on account of that foolish game we played at Penrith.’

‘I had guessed at something of the kind. Well, as another saying goes, I have stuck my neck out, so I will take the risk of sticking it out still further. Which of our party, in your opinion, is the likeliest to have invaded my hotel room and stolen your cousin’s paper of answers?’

‘What! Are you serious, Dame Beatrice?’

‘Oh, yes. Fortunately Laura had everybody’s answers down in shorthand, so it was no great matter in one sense that another set of answers was substituted for Miss Catherine’s.’

‘You amaze me! A substitute set of answers? A joke, do you suppose?’

‘I suppose nothing. I merely state a fact.’

‘But — if I may turn inquisitor for a change — what caused you to have copies made of the answers?’

‘Cast your mind back. I have answered that question before.’

‘I think I must hoist you with your own petard. Your previous answer, that the envelope I had provided was over-large to be accommodated in your handbag, was the truth, up to a point, but I do not think it was the whole truth. Am I right, ma’am?’ He smiled disarmingly and wagged a playful finger at her. Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘Touché,’ she said, ‘and a well-deserved tit for tat. I was greatly intrigued by your novel method of playing the Truth Game; so much so, in fact, that I decided some hidden purpose was behind it. If such a thought had occurred to me, I considered that it might well have occurred to others, so I left my door ajar deliberately in order to test my theory and somebody was naïve enough to fall into the trap. My interest in the matter was not, at that time, to discover who the intruder was, but which of the papers was important to him or her.’

‘I see. Well, I think you will have anticipated my answer to the question you

asked some short time ago and which we have sidetracked. The only person in the party who would have been sufficiently interested in Catherine's answers to steal them would be young Stewart, I suppose."

'Stewart? Ah, the ardent lover, of course.'

'I imagine he hoped to find out something which, up to that point, Catherine and I had kept to ourselves.'

'Had you known him before he came on the tour with us?'

'Oh, yes. He had been one of my students. Catherine was interested in him and I believe she helped him financially from time to time, and, in fact, she paid his expenses on the tour.'

'May I ask whether Stewart is his first name?'

'Oh, yes, it is. He is half-French and his surname is Lesmains. We never use it, and he himself has taken Stewart as his only name. It has not been changed by deed poll, but most people take Stewart to be his surname. I don't know why he doesn't like the other, except that he says it is a disadvantage in England to have a foreign name. I hardly think that is so, but people must be allowed their little prejudices and fancies. To save you the trouble of asking — that is, if you have any curiosity upon the matter — Owen is my first name and my surname. I am Owen Q. X. Owen.'

'Oh, I did not need to question you about your own name,' said Dame Beatrice, leering at him in what he hoped was a friendly fashion. 'Be assured that I remembered you when I accepted the invitation to join your party.'

'I suppose you guessed there was a reason?'

'For inviting me? I had no idea of it until others began to speculate upon the reason for my inclusion.'

'I looked forward, of course, to the pleasure of your company on the tour, but I realised, very early on, that you had no suspicion of my other reason for inviting you. The Truth Game was — forgive me! — to give you a hint. I expected that the answers on one of the papers might cause you to come to certain conclusions regarding the mental stability or otherwise of one of the party.'

'I see.'

'Did it ever occur to you, Dame Beatrice, that Catherine herself may have slipped into your room that evening at Penrith and removed her own set of answers? It has only just occurred to me, but now it seems the most likely thing in the world. She objected to my way of playing the Truth Game, you know.'

'So you have told me. You said, Professor, that you and your cousin were

close. What did you mean by that?’

‘Well, as a matter of fact, we were affianced just before her death.’

‘I must again offer you my sympathy.’

‘It isn’t necessary. I knew she was suffering from a terminal illness. The doctors deemed it right that I should know. I offered her marriage so that I had the right to look after her at the end, but she did not know that was my reason.’

‘Who else knew that she had not very long to live?’

‘Nobody. I was told in confidence and I respected that confidence. It would hardly have been suitable for Stewart to know. He was her heir.’

‘You think he did not know that, either?’

‘Catherine was secretive. She would not have disclosed such a matter.’

‘I wonder?’ said Dame Beatrice thoughtfully. ‘She might have relished the gratitude of a handsome young man.’

‘I noticed you didn’t point out to him that if Catherine had such strong objections to his version of the Truth Game she need not have played it,’ said Laura. ‘You know, I am prepared to hazard a guess that that man is a villain.’

‘Dear me! On what, ignoring feminine intuition, do you base that conjecture?’

‘As usual, by the pricking of my thumbs.’

‘An unreliable guide, surely?’

‘No,’ said Laura, ‘I have never found it so.’

‘You terrify me.’

‘It’s all very well to laugh, but *somebody* killed that poor woman.’

‘Of which poor woman do we speak?’

‘Catherine. I couldn’t stick her, but she didn’t deserve to be murdered.’

‘What of the unknown woman at Callanish?’

‘Well, she was certainly known to somebody and that somebody didn’t like her.’

‘Murder is more often a matter of expediency than of dislike. It is more often a case of *cherchez l’argent* than anything more picturesque and romantic.’

‘What did *you* make of Owen?’

‘Of little that I had not made of him already.’

‘Ask a silly question and you get the Delphic oracle. Do you think he’s a villain?’

‘We all have the seeds of villainy in us. Original sin is not only religious doctrine; it is an unescapable fact.’

‘I’ll take it as read. So now, I suppose, we tackle Lionel and Clarissa. The

inquest must have been adjourned, I suppose. It usually is in cases of murder, unless the police have actually got somebody on the hook. I suppose the finger of the law points straight to those two unless they've got an unbreakable alibi and that will depend largely upon when and where Catherine was actually killed.'

'As usual, you have nicked the matter. It may go hard with the couple if it is proved that Catherine died while they were still accompanying her southwards.'

'The point, as I see it, is that it would have taken two people to heave the body in that sack over those four-foot railings.'

'Where, had we not followed Miss Starr's lead and gone to visit the Rollright Stones, the body might have remained until the olfactory sense in other and later visitors to the Whispering Knights was sufficiently offended to cause an investigation into the contents of the sack to become imperative.'

'A gruesome thought. Glad I'm not a doctor or a policeman. Funny, though, that young Capella was responsible, in a sense, for our finding both bodies.'

'Yes, indeed. It seems to take matters out of the hands of blind Fate and place them in a human or, if you prefer it, an inhuman context.'

'You mean that somebody *intended* that Capella should be present when the bodies were found?'

'I cannot be as explicit as that at this juncture, but I cannot ignore her strange obsession with dead bodies in rectangles, cist graves and so forth, and we are not the only people who would have heard about them. Anybody in our party could have done so. The point has been made before.'

Chapter 14

LIONEL AND CLARISSA

‘In crooked banks a spring so flows
O’er stone, mud, weeds: yet still clear goes.’
Owen Feltham



Owen had been able to give Dame Beatrice a telephone number as well as the address, so Laura was able to ring up and arrange a meeting with Lionel and Clarissa at their home, but before this took place the police, in the form of Inspector Marsh accompanied by a sergeant, turned up at the Stone House.

‘The Southampton chaps have been on to that couple,’ said Marsh. ‘As you know, Dame Beatrice, the various Forces are much better co-ordinated than they used to be. In these days of motorways and fast cars a criminal can get from here to yon in a matter of hours, so we have to have an arranged liaison between the various Forces, let alone all the fun and games connected with Interpol and the drugs and the arms rackets.’

‘I am interested in the couple for the same reason as yours, of course,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes. After all, they are the last people known to have seen Miss Owen alive. We got very little help from them. Their story is that she was most certainly alive and well when she left them, but we’re a bit dubious about dates. The medical evidence suggests that she had been dead for at least three days when you drew attention to that sack at Little Rollright. It was investigated the same day and provided a very nasty experience for those who opened it. Can you tell us any more about your own visit to the Rollright Stones? As we understand it, you went there more or less on impulse. The visit had not previously been planned.’

‘That is quite true and is easily explained. Finding that our journey to Oxford would take us within a reasonable distance of Little Rollright, Miss Babbacombe-Starr, our young companion, asked whether we might visit the stones. She had visited them as a child and had been greatly impressed by the legend of the disappointed king, his circle of men and the treachery of his five knights. We had been visiting various stone circles and prehistoric graves, and it seemed to me a very suitable climax to our tour.’

‘Miss Catherine Owen had been a member of your touring party. How did she get on with the other members?’

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that is what Mrs Gavin here would call the sixty-four-thousand dollar question, is it not? My answer will not help you. I really have no idea. She was cool and detached in her attitude to the other members, although she appeared to have found Mr Stewart, our youngest member except

for Miss Starr and Sister Veronica, a knowledgeable and stimulating companion. But when she left the tour with the couple we knew as Lionel and Clarissa, he remained at Ardrossan and went with the rest of us to Inverness. From there, Mrs Gavin, Miss Starr and I went over to the Isle of Lewis.'

'Where all three of you saw another woman who had been murdered in the same way as Miss Owen,'

'That is so. The rest of the story — I refer to the disappearance of the corpse and its subsequent reappearance on the shores of Loch Roag, you already know.'

'Upon taking further thought, as you must have done, Dame Beatrice, have you any idea at all who the woman was? All we can get from Miss Starr is a very garbled and fanciful story of a person who flitted from tall stone to tall stone at some of the places your party visited on the tour.'

'I perceive the direction in which you are heading, Inspector, but I can assure you that Miss Starr's flights of fancy can have no bearing on the deaths of either of the two women. She was so completely under our eye from the moment the three of us left Inverness that she could not possibly have committed even one murder, let alone two.'

'May I ask what your movements were after you left Stornoway? We have Miss Starr's version, of course.'

'We stayed on Skye, at Glasgow, in Chester and, after we had deposited Miss Starr at her home, Mrs Gavin and I spent a night in Oxford.'

'Thank you, madam. If anything useful should come to light...'

'I shall, of course, inform you.'

'Thank you, madam. We shall welcome your co-operation.'

'It looks pretty bad for Lionel and Clarissa,' said Laura, when Marsh and his sergeant had gone.

'I think you are right. I shall present the couple — and in uncompromising terms — with what I see as their possible motive. It will be interesting to find out how they react. What the police are doing, I imagine, is checking the details of their journey south from Ardrossan, and I shall pursue the same line of enquiry.'

Lionel and Clarissa had a ground-floor flat at Lee-on-the-Solent, with nothing but a broad grassy strip between their front garden gate and the sea. They received Dame Beatrice and Laura with a delight which was more simulated than real, and once the greetings were over Lionel launched into the attack.

'We've been absolutely badgered by the police since Catherine's body was

found,' he said. 'It's really most unfair. Why should we be expected to know any more about it than anybody else? She didn't die while she was in our company, and we've never even *been* to the Rollright Stones, let alone leaving a friend's body in a sack there. The whole business is absolutely preposterous.'

'No doubt it is,' said Dame Beatrice soothingly. 'Unfortunately for yourselves, you appear to have been the last people (except for the murderer, of course) to have seen Catherine Owen alive.'

'That has still to be proved,' said Clarissa. 'We are not alarmed, of course. Nobody who knows us would dream of connecting us with such a dreadful business, but the whole thing is dangerous from another point of view. The publicity may jeopardise our new job.'

'Another thing connected with that aspect,' said Lionel, 'is that we are impatient to move house, for the new job will provide us with rent-free accommodation, but while all this fuss is going on we don't want to carry the dirty linen into a new environment, even if the police would let us leave, and I am not at all sure that, at the present juncture, they would.'

'Oh, I think you exaggerate,' said Dame Beatrice. 'When you returned from the tour, did you bring Catherine here?'

'Bring her here? Certainly not. As I have said, when we returned from the tour our concern was to arrange to move house. We would have had no time for casual visitors.'

'You say you did not bring her here; so where, *en route*, did you leave her?'

'We dropped her off at Heathrow. She said she could get a taxi there.'

'You must all have spent a night or two somewhere between Ardrossan and Heathrow, I think.'

'Yes, we did, but only one night. I am accustomed to longdistance driving, so we made the journey in two hops, the first from Ardrossan to Carlisle and then on the motor roads to London's Heathrow. Any more questions?'

Lionel spoke smilingly, but Laura sensed that there was disquietude behind the smile and perhaps a touch of menace. This was enhanced when Clarissa asked hotly,

'Look, what *is* all this?'

'Well, 'all this' culminated in murder,' replied Dame Beatrice calmly, 'and, as you probably know, murder is part of my business, particularly so in this case, as I travelled in Catherine's company so, to that extent, have a personal reason for trying to find out who killed her. You must be patient with me. Surely you, of all people, have an interest in her death and a willingness to help find out who

caused it. I will not deceive you. I am, as usual, working with the police.'

There was silence. Then Lionel spoke.

'We are rebuked,' he said, 'and rightly. I am sure, Dame Beatrice, you will understand that we have been in a state of shock since the news broke and are not yet quite ourselves. Ask what questions you will and we shall answer as best we can, shall we not, Clarissa?'

'Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry, Dame Beatrice. What do you want to know?'

'Perhaps you would give me, tedious although it may be for you to repeat the account you will have given the police, a résumé of your journey to London from Ardrossan.'

They had little to tell her. The journey had been completely uneventful. They had spent only one night at a hotel. There had been some talk of crossing from Carlisle eastwards to look at the cup and ring marks at Roughing Linn, and the couple, left to themselves, might have done this, but Catherine was so anxious to get back to London that they had abandoned the idea, sped down the motorways and got her to the London area in two days.

'Why, having decided to join the tour, did you leave it uncompleted?' Dame Beatrice asked. They had talked matters over, it appeared, and when it was suggested that there was to be a longer stay in Inverness, they had decided that if the scheduled visit to Stornoway was still under contemplation, they had neither the time nor the money for such an extension of the itinerary.

'Laura, Miss Starr and I spent only one night in Inverness,' said Dame Beatrice, 'before we crossed to Lewis, and, of course, you could have done the same. May I ask, though, why, if you were so anxious to cut short the tour, you contemplated crossing over from Carlisle to visit other stone circles in Northumbria?'

'Oh, it would have meant only one more night on the road and would have taken less time than the couple of nights we expected to stay in Stornoway,' said Lionel.

'Ah, yes, of course. Did you gather from Catherine her reason for abandoning the tour at Ardrossan?'

'I thought you understood her reason. She was anxious to get home and complete her preparations for going to America.'

'You never suspected that she might have had at least one other reason for abandoning the tour?'

'I think,' said Lionel, 'that you are putting a leading question, Dame Beatrice, but, as this is not a court of law, I will accept it. The answer will

disappoint you. We suspected no other reason for her action.'

'Not even if I remind you that her paper of answers to the Truth Game was stolen from my room at Penrith and another set of answers substituted?'

'Remind us?' said Clarissa. 'But we had no idea that such a thing had happened. Was it a joke of some kind?'

'I hardly think so. The inference is that Catherine's own answers may have given away somebody else's secret.' Dame Beatrice watched the two faces, but neither gave anything away. She deduced that Lionel and Clarissa were facing a well-rehearsed situation and were prepared for it. 'It has been suggested to me,' she went on, 'that Catherine had a reason for discontinuing the tour apart from the one she gave you. I wonder whether she made any mention of it after the three of you had left the rest of us?'

They looked at one another and then shook their heads. They had always found Catherine extremely reticent and self-contained, they said.

'Not a woman who would give much of herself away,' added Lionel. 'Rather a forbidding personality, on the whole. Won't you enlighten us?'

'Yes, certainly I will. It has been suggested to me that she was beginning to find Mr Stewart's amorous approaches unwelcome.'

'What rubbish!' exclaimed Clarissa. Lionel, more mildly, said that not only had Catherine never given them any inkling of any such matter on the journey home, but he thought she would have been extremely gratified if she had received any such advances. Catherine was frozen, he said, and would have welcomed any chance of thawing out.

'Besides, his sights were so obviously set on Capella Starr,' said Clarissa. 'I should think he was taken by surprise, wasn't he, when you carted her off to Stornoway? I suppose he had already committed himself to Clava.'

'He may have decided to see both Clava and Callanish,' said Dame Beatrice. Lionel said excitedly that perhaps that was what Stewart had done.

'I don't intend to suggest that he murdered that unknown woman on Lewis,' he added, 'but it would be typical of his sense of humour to have found the body and placed it in that passage grave. The police referred to it when they were questioning us, and really Capella was very tiresome about her ghost and its flittings and her always seeing dead bodies in rectangles, and so forth.'

'It certainly would be interesting to know what he did after he left Inverness,' said Clarissa.

'He could not have known that the three of us would visit the Rollright Stones,' said Laura. 'It was a last-minute decision and was suggested by Capella

herself. You heard that Catherine's body was in the sack we discovered, I suppose?'

'We could hardly help doing so when you consider the way the police have harassed us,' said Clarissa resentfully. 'It's so utterly stupid of them. Lots of people must have known she was alive and well when we left her at Heathrow. The trouble is that, so far, the police don't seem to have found anybody who will come forward and swear to that. She told us she lived in a house let in the form of three self-contained flats, but the other tenants were on holiday or, at any rate, not at home, I suppose, or they would have told of her safe arrival. It seems to me that our luck has been completely out.'

'Once again,' said Dame Beatrice, 'I must say I am slightly puzzled. Were you not very anxious to get home here to begin your preparations for moving house? Could she not have taken the train from Carlisle or somewhere else and let you come straight back here instead of dropping her at Heathrow?'

'Oh, she was lumbered with a suitcase and things,' said Lionel. 'One didn't like to discard her, and, as things have turned out, it wouldn't have made any difference, anyway.'

'When do you expect to take up your new appointment?'

'If we ever do. That is to say, if the publicity over this wretched murder does not cause the university to change its mind and appoint another candidate.'

'Two other candidates,' said Clarissa. 'The post calls for a married couple, each on a separate salary.'

'It sounds more like a couple of domestic servants, put like that,' said Lionel, 'but actually it is to run a university hostel in Lancashire and would suit us ideally. The money is more than I have been getting as a prep-school master and Clarissa as a school secretary. We shan't need to keep on this flat, you see, because the quarters at the hostel are rent-free and I shall also be doing some lecturing in modern languages which will be far more interesting than trying to teach the rudiments of French to small boys.'

'Well, there wasn't much to be gained from all that,' said Laura, when they had taken their departure. 'We are no further forward. They told us nothing that we did not know before we talked to them.'

'You mean nothing that we did not guess. It is still only theory that they are brother and sister, but are passing themselves off as a married couple in order to obtain this post which seems to mean so much to them. If they thought that Catherine had any suspicion as to their real relationship, they may well have thought that she might prove dangerous and would be better out of their way.'

‘But how could she have found out?’

‘I said “any suspicion”. Everybody must have noticed that they always occupied separate bedrooms at the hotels.’

‘Are you going to tell the police that you think they have a motive for killing her?’

‘Not at present, and perhaps not at all. I shall not be satisfied that they are guilty until or unless I can prove, or the police can prove to me, that they murdered the woman on Lewis. I am convinced that the two deaths are connected and were brought about by the same person or persons.’

‘What makes you think so? The other woman was nothing to do with our party.’

‘I have a suspicion that she might have had a connection with some member of our party. As Lionel pointed out, Capella’s dreams and visions, whether they were inspired by Sister Veronica’s suggestions or not, had become known to all of us.’

‘Well, that seems to let Lionel and Clarissa out.’

‘Not until their homeward journey has been very thoroughly checked, and that is a task for the police, not for us.’

‘If they prove to be in the clear — that is to say, if you are right, and you always are right — it boils down to Stewart or Owen.’

‘Or both of them.’

‘You’re talking about the business of heaving that sack over the railings, but they are both tall, strong men. I should think one of them on his own could have tumbled it over. I shouldn’t think Catherine was all that heavy. I could have done the job myself, I think, if I’d been pushed to it. Of the two of them, I’d plump for Stewart. I think Lionel was right about his sense of humour.’

‘I repeat that nobody could have known that we had decided to visit the Rollright Stones.’

‘Capella herself could have told somebody. It was at her suggestion that we went there.’

‘But we are joint witnesses to the fact that she could not have committed either of the murders.’

‘Yes, of course, there’s that,’ said Laura in a doubtful tone. They were met on their return by an unexpected but welcome visitor; This was Laura’s husband.

‘I thought I’d like to look you up,’ he said to Dame Beatrice. ‘We haven’t been called in officially — the local chaps naturally prefer to solve their own crimes if they can — but my Deputy told me he had heard you had mixed

yourself up with murder again, so I thought I would run down and hear all about it from your personal standpoint.'

'There is plenty to hear,' said Laura. 'How long can you stay?'

'Only for tonight, but I need not leave until after lunch tomorrow. I must go then. We've got another top security lark on.'

He was given the story after dinner that night and, when he had heard it, he said that the set-up must be bizarre enough even to satisfy his wife.

'Bizarre is the right word,' said Laura. 'What do you make of it all?'

'A very remarkable story and a very unusual set of suspects,' Gavin replied. 'Flitting ghosts and stone circles, a nun with extrasensory powers, a girl who starts off with poltergeists — how did you come to hear about that, by the way?'

'Oh, in general chat with Capella after we saw the body at Callanish. She repeated what she had told us previously about bodies in rectangles and then mentioned poltergeists and said she had told Stewart about her experiences. Dame B. thinks the same person committed both murders.'

'Well,' said Gavin, 'it does sound as though the interval between the two deaths was too short for this to be a copycat murder, especially as the Lewis story took days to seep down south. What rather interests me is what caused you to visit the Rollright Stones at all. When you wrote you gave me an outline of your itinerary. I looked it up before I came. The last item on it was the trip to Lewis and Harris. There was no mention of the Rollrights, was there?'

'No. We had this girl, Capella, with us who had been taken to see them when she was twelve and she wanted to see them again. It wasn't far off our route, as we were going to drop her in north Oxford, anyway, so we went along, and there, of course, in one of the fenced enclosures, was that horrible sack.'

'Ah, yes. Did the girl seem upset or perturbed in any way when you spotted the sack?'

'I believe she spotted it before we did, as a matter of fact. No, sorry! I'm wrong about that. I was the one who pointed it out, and it was Dame B. who referred it to the custodian. Capella didn't even seem particularly interested in it, so far as I remember. In any case, she couldn't possibly have been responsible for its being there. She was with us all the time after we left Inverness.'

'How long did the two men, Owen and Stewart, stay there?'

'I have no idea. We made a very leisurely journey southward, so anybody who wanted to push on down to the Rollrights could easily have outdistanced us, I should think. Against that, Stewart didn't have a car, although Owen did, but I can't see them in collusion over a murder.'

‘What did you make of Stewart?’

‘He was a bit contradictory. You know — very much the dilettante to begin with, flippant, making mock-love to Capella, irritating Catherine, and all that sort of young-man stuff — but deadly serious about stone circles and chambered cairns and cist graves and cup and ring marks, as we soon discovered.’

‘Schizophrenic, do you think?’ Gavin said, turning to Dame Beatrice. ‘Anything that you noticed professionally?’

‘Gracious, no!’ she replied. ‘He seemed a perfectly natural and rather pleasant young man. It is interesting that you should ask that, though. It came to my ears that more than one in our little company suspected that I had been invited to join the party for a reason not unconnected with my professional life, as you suggest.’

‘Oh, really? And were they right?’

‘Not that I am aware. There was no hint of anything of the kind when I received a very cordial invitation from Professor Owen for Laura and myself to join his expedition.’

‘That doesn’t say much. Put the ferret down the rabbit-hole and nature does the rest,’ said Laura. Her husband laughed.

‘I expect Dame B. has been called all sorts of things in her time,’ he said, ‘but I doubt whether she has often been personified as a ferret.’

‘You know what I meant. People always think psychiatrists go about like Sir Roderick Glossop, and classify people automatically as potentially dangerous, all right unless the moon is full, frustrated, manic-depressive — you name it and they think Dame B. has stuck it in somebody’s pigeon-hole. Impossible to persuade them that she hasn’t a sort of computerised card-index system registering all her acquaintances and their mental peculiarities.’

‘Sounds a bit like an author I knew. People he met always assumed that he was summing them up in order to put them in a book. Well, how long did it take you to get to the Rollrights from Stornoway? You said it was a leisurely journey.’

When Laura told him, Gavin summed it up by pointing out that anybody who had been in Owen’s party except, he supposed, Dame Beatrice, Laura, Capella and Catherine herself, would have had plenty of time to commit the murder, cover his tracks and be off on his lawful occasions before anybody had had the sense to report a bulging sack where, presumably, no bulging sack should have been. Laura said tartly that they had already worked that out.

‘Did you have the slightest suspicion of what might be inside the sack?’

Gavin asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh yes,’ she replied coolly, ‘of course I had. There are certain humps, bumps and other outlines which are unmistakable when one has seen as many dead bodies as I have. I hoped I was wrong, but I did not think there was any doubt, so I reported at once to the woman in charge. I did not, of course, tell her of my suspicions.’

‘You did not think of this Catherine Owen?’

‘No, I did not think of Catherine, or, indeed, of any of our party.’

‘You had seen a corpse in another stone circle. Was there no connection in your mind?’

‘The body we saw at Callanish was not that of a member of our party.’

‘I’ll tell you whose body it might have been, though,’ said Laura. ‘I’m only saying this out of the blue, because it’s only just this minute occurred to me.’

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but it is only the wildest surmise on your part and I am sure you are mistaken. No such person existed in reality, no matter what Capella may think.’

‘You know what *I’m* thinking, then?’

‘If your thoughts march with mine, they concern themselves with the mysterious figure which was said to flit from stone to stone during the early part of the tour. I am certain that there was no such figure, or perhaps I should say, no figure of flesh and blood, though I do not doubt that Sister Veronica saw something unusual and that she communicated her vision to the impressionable and suggestible Capella.’

‘What do you propose to do next?’ asked Gavin.

‘Visit the nuns, who will be back by now, and find out what happened in Inverness after we left,’ said Dame Beatrice.

Chapter 15

A CONVENT CONCLAVE

‘Each be other’s comfort kind;
Deep, deeper than divined,
Divine charity, dear charity,
Fast you ever, fast bind.’

Gerard Manley Hopkins



We've done a considerable amount of checking, Dame Beatrice,' said Marsh, a day or two after Gavin had returned to London. 'Much obliged for the list of hotels Mrs Gavin gave us over the phone.'

'Oh, you checked our homeward journey as well as that of the Smith couple and Miss Owen, did you, Inspector?'

'In fairness to you and to ourselves, we did, ma'am. Just routine, of course, but we like to see our way clear.'

'And do you?'

'So far as yourself, Mrs Gavin and Miss Starr are concerned, we are fully satisfied, as, of course, we expected to be. All three signatures are in the hotel registers and as we have been in touch with Miss Starr we were able to give a description of all three of you with satisfactory results. Unfortunately we have not been quite so lucky in the case of the other three. We tried all the hotels in Carlisle, but Smith is such a common name and the young couple themselves are not remarkable in any way, so we got nothing conclusive.'

'Did the couple not give the name of their hotel?'

'They were vague. Told us it wasn't far from the Cathedral, but they had forgotten its name.'

'I may be able to help you if you feel inclined to try again.'

'It would clear up the point, but it isn't all that important. It's what they did between leaving Carlisle and returning to their home which really concerns us. But what have you to suggest, ma'am?'

'That you repeat your enquiries, but, this time, ask about a Mr and Mrs Smith who booked separate bedrooms.'

Marsh looked at her enquiringly.

'Sounds a funny thing for a young married couple to do,' he said. 'Does one of them snore?'

'I have no information on the point. However, Inspector, there is another point. If Miss Owen was with them, her entry in the hotel register would have preceded or immediately followed theirs.'

'We thought of that, Dame Beatrice, and that's the most unsatisfactory thing of all. None of the hotels we contacted has the signature of a Miss Owen with an address in London either in front of, or after, the names of a Mr and Mrs Smith. I think we must press the couple pretty hard.'

‘Can they have forgotten the name of the town as well as the name of the hotel?’

‘It looks to us as though they’re trying to cover their tracks, ma’am, and that, taken together with the fact that the murdered woman at Little Rollright is known to have been in their company when they left Ardrossan doesn’t look too good for them, does it?’

‘I do not think the Rollright case will be solved, Inspector, until somebody identifies the dead woman at Callanish.’

‘I’m sure the Scottish lads are doing everything they can about that, Dame Beatrice. There are points in common in the two murders, and we can’t overlook the similarities between them. There is the setting of stone circles, the fact that both women were murdered in exactly the same way and the other fact that the same three people discovered the bodies. It’s a good thing we know all about you and Mrs Gavin.’ He smiled as he said this. Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘And a good thing both of us can go bail for Miss Starr’s innocence,’ she said. Marsh nodded.

‘You’ve said it, ma’am,’ he responded. ‘We have interviewed the young lady, who seems rather subject to hallucinations, I would think.’

‘Oh, no. She suffers from being extremely suggestible, from having a father who has always earned his living by writing articles based on the supernatural and from having read not only all his own works, but the books from which he derived his subject-matter. She has a vivid imagination and a retentive mind, that is all.’

‘We’ll take your word for it, of course, Dame Beatrice. All the same, it’s a bit of luck for her that she’s got your backing. She told us she had seen in Cumbria what she is sure was the Callanish woman, but whether it was a ghost or a real person who was dodging about, she doesn’t seem at all sure.’

‘I don’t believe she saw anything, Inspector, until Sister Veronica, who undoubtedly is what the layman calls “psychic”, but which I prefer to call gifted (or cursed) with extra-sensory perception, mentioned the wraith to some of us.’

‘Miss Starr recounted to us a dream she had had.’

‘Oh, yes, about the Callanish setting. If you examined her father’s library you would find every item of that dream recorded in one or other of the books he studied. I have no doubt that a precocious and clever little girl had looked at them all at some time or other, with or without her father’s permission. He makes a very satisfactory living out of the material he studies, and I have no doubt that he himself is immune from superstition, but, to an imaginative child,

reading became a source of dreams and fantasies which, even at her present age and stage, she has not outgrown. Have you spoken to the two nuns who were members of our party?’

‘No, ma’am. I draw the line at convents unless I’m really up a gum tree. In any case, I don’t see how either lady can help us. Neither of them has ever been over to Lewis or had any connection with the Rollright Stones, since these were not on your tour programme. If you think the ladies could be of any assistance to us, Dame Beatrice...’

‘I was going to look them up, in any case, although I agree with you that there is little hope that they can assist the enquiry. What about Mr Stewart?’

‘I got his address when I interviewed Professor Owen, but it seems that the young gentlemen has gone cavorting off to Ireland to look at stone circles there.’

‘Yes, he is writing a thesis. I will give you an account of my visit to the convent if anything useful comes of my going there.’

The mother house of the Order of St. Endellion was in Cornwall, and the Exeter convent of which Sister Pascal was prioress was a small one. Apart from the prioress and Sister Veronica, there were only four other nuns in residence and the convent itself, which stood in its own pleasant grounds outside the city, had been a private house before the Order took it over. The nuns had changed the drawing-room into a chapel, the morning-room into the convent parlour to which seculars could be admitted, the dining-room into the Community room which normally was taboo to the laity, and the large kitchen into a refectory, a convenient arrangement since all the cooking could be done in the adjacent scullery which was sizable, well-lighted and well equipped.

It was recreation time when Dame Beatrice and Laura arrived, and as a mark of favour which, having been called in to investigate happenings in two other convents, Dame Beatrice was quick to appreciate, Sister Pascal took them into the Community room instead of the more formal parlour.

The Community themselves, who had been chatting, sewing or reading, stood up when the visitors came in and prepared to vacate the room, but Sister Pascal, having introduced Dame Beatrice and Laura, invited the others to remain.

‘This is your room,’ she said. ‘If Dame Beatrice has anything to say which is meant for my ears alone, we shall go into the parlour.’ She had introduced the nuns as Sister Benedict, Sister Jude, Sister Edward Martyr, Sister Lucia and Sister Veronica, ‘whom, of course, you know. Will you have this chair, Dame Beatrice? This one, Mrs Gavin? Please sit down, everybody.’

Sister Veronica had kissed Dame Beatrice on both cheeks, the convent 'kiss of peace', but apparently sensing Laura's astonishment and translating it into disapproval, the young nun merely shook her by the hand.

When all were seated, Sister Pascal said, 'We are deeply shocked by the news of Miss Owen's death. You must have been even more so, and as for Miss Babbacombe-Starr!'

'Yes. She was deeply shocked by both deaths. It was very unfortunate for her that she was present when both bodies were found.'

'You said on the telephone that Sister Veronica and I might be able to help you. I cannot quite see how. We have never been nearer to the Rollright Stones than Oxford, and we have never been on the island of Lewis, where you saw the body of this so far unknown woman.'

'I have a theory — but it is only a theory — that one of our party knew her,' said Dame Beatrice. Light dawned on Sister Veronica. Her beautiful grey eyes widened. Her mouth, 'mighty like a rose', as Stewart had been known to quote on one occasion (although the compliment was not paid in her presence or passed on to her), rounded into an astonished 'O' before she accepted the statement and said simply, 'Our extra member!'

'You make it sound like an extra arm or leg,' said the rotund Sister Benedict, 'and only Caliban, according to Stephano, was so equipped. Indeed, he was credited with four legs, twice the usual number.'

Apparently Benedict filled the role of licensed jester to the Community, for all that Pascal said to Veronica was: 'How do you mean, Sister? — what extra member?'

'I believe I incurred your displeasure when I mentioned, while we were inspecting the stone circles, that our party sometimes numbered ten when Mr Stewart was not with us, and eleven when he was,' said Sister Veronica.

'I remember your saying so, but nobody else, except Miss Starr, claimed to have seen an extra person.'

'I suppose most people took no notice because they thought it was just another visitor, like yourselves,' said Sister Lucia.

'I would have thought the same,' said Sister Veronica, 'except' — she smiled with exquisite sweetness — 'one is always inclined to suspect the child who tries to keep herself out of the picture, and this apparition I saw was furtive in the extreme and made a most unpleasant impression on me. He generated an atmosphere of evil.'

'He?' interpolated Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh, yes. I was unsure at first, because so many women on holiday wear trousers, but on thinking things over, I am sure it was a very shadowy man.’

‘So we will leave it at that,’ said Sister Pascal with authority. She was overridden by Dame Beatrice, who appeared unaware that the subject was supposed to be closed.

‘Can you remember when was the last time you saw this person?’ she asked.

Sister Veronica looked at her prioress, received a nod and replied, ‘We certainly saw nobody of the kind on Arran, so the last time would have been at Castlerigg, I think.’

‘And after Castlerigg our whole party was never together,’ said Laura. ‘I wonder whether that had anything to do with it?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Dame Beatrice, looking at Sister Pascal, ‘either you or Sister Veronica would give me an account of how you spent the time in Inverness.’

‘I doubt whether they spent it murdering anybody,’ said Sister Benedict.

‘And, if they had, we could hardly expect them to say so,’ said Dame Beatrice, leering benevolently at the humorist. Sister Pascal looked at Sister Veronica, who blushed and said that she hoped for correction if her memory proved unreliable. They had gone to visit the Clava site. She went on to give a description of it. She and Sister Pascal had left the Inverness convent at eleven in the morning and had taken the Nairn road. They had stopped at the battlefield of Culloden and after that they had branched off on to the road to Grantown-on-Spey, but soon left it for a narrow road from Balloch which crossed the River Nairn and brought them within reach of the three Clava cairns.

These were the most interesting objects of the tour. They were probably of Neolithic origin and were erected, she had read, before the Bronze Age stone circle which surrounded them. They were aligned on the setting of the mid-winter sun and it was possible to see a great deal of them because there were entrance passages between walls of stone, some of which bore cup-markings.

The cairns themselves were also shored up by large uprights of stone and the whole site bore suggestions of magical practices. The cup-marks offered these, and the thought of crouching, superstitious Neolithic men watching for the setting of the mid-winter sun from a passage which led into the tombs of their ancestors was almost frightening and very fascinating and thrilling, Veronica concluded.

‘And did Professor Owen and Mr Stewart share your enthusiasm for the Clava complex?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘Oh, they did not accompany us. There was never any suggestion that they

should,’ said Sister Pascal. Observing Laura’s surprise, she added, ‘We were very much relieved when Professor Owen told us that the tour would include Inverness. We knew we could stay at our convent there instead of at a hotel. He said that Mr Stewart had suggested adding Clava to the tour and cutting out the visit to Callanish, but we, Sister and I, were not going to Callanish, so it made no difference to us. He said goodbye to us, as you did, and added that as he would not be available to drive us home, he begged us to accept a sum to cover our railway fares to London and on to Exeter. We thought this most generous of him’.

‘So what about Stewart?’ asked Laura.

‘Oh, the Inverness convent had its own car and a Sister who, of course, could drive it, so four of us went to Clava and we had a most delightful day out, with the stop at Culloden on the way.’

‘So you saw nothing of the two men after they had deposited you at the convent on the evening of our arrival,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘That same evening Laura and I were with them at the hotel, of course, but we went off to Ullapool next morning early, having said goodbye the night before, as we did not know whether they would be up in time to breakfast with us.’

‘Well!’ said Laura when she and Dame Beatrice were on their way back to the Stone House, ‘that’s put the cat among the pigeons with a vengeance!’

‘In what way?’

‘One or other or both those men could have hopped on a plane for Stornoway and made contact with that unknown woman and killed her.’

‘But we know of no connection between them and the woman. The equal chance is that Mr Stewart had decided to visit other Scottish sites — there are many in north-east Scotland, including, I believe, the recumbent stone circles of Aberdeenshire only eighty miles from Clava — and, failing his company and masculine support, Professor Owen may have jibbed at the thought of escorting two nuns and having to book hotel accommodation for them, as well as for himself, on the long journey back to Exeter and so freed himself from his obligations.’

‘Well, your guess is as good as and probably better than mine, but I still smell stinking fish. Look, what’s to stop me from going up to Inverness and putting out a few feelers?’

‘By all means, provided that you will agree to take George with you as co-driver.’

‘I don’t need him, but as you wish. Do I have *carte blanche*, or do you want

to suggest a course of action?’

‘I leave everything in your hands.’

‘Which means you don’t expect me to bring home any bacon. Och, weel, a jaunt’s a jaunt, for a’ that.’

‘Heaven bless your childishness! Have a good time, but I should try the convent first.’

‘You don’t suppose the two nuns were telling us fairy tales, do you?’

‘Certainly not, but two other nuns were involved in the expedition to Clava. There might be additions to Sister Veronica’s account. One never knows.’

‘Blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall be gloriously surprised. G.K. Chesterton at his most controversial, wouldn’t you say? Then I suppose I go to the hotel and try to check on the two men. I think I ought to make the journey in two stages, making an overnight stop in Carlisle. That way perhaps I can find out what the police have failed to do, that is — ’

‘If you think you can find out where Lionel, Clarissa and Catherine spent the night on their way south from Ardrossan, I fear you will be disappointed. If the police did not find the hotel there is little likelihood that you will be luckier. There is a strong possibility, you know, that either failing to find accommodation or deciding, from motives of economy, to do without it, they all slept in Lionel’s car.’

‘I would still like to have a bash.’

‘Of course you would, and, of course, unless you come up with some very startling evidence regarding the Inverness activities of Professor Owen and Mr Stewart, Lionel and Clarissa remain under a black cloud of suspicion as the last of our party known to have been with Catherine immediately prior to her death.’

Chapter 16

A SHOT IN THE DARK

‘I shot an arrow into the air...’

H. W. Longfellow



Well,’ said Laura, when she got back to the Stone House, ‘I have a tale to tell. Whether it will help the police, I don’t know. In any case, I think you had better hear it first.’

‘I trust,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that it is not full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’

‘It’s unlucky to quote from *Macbeth*.’

‘Only backstage in a theatre.’

‘Do you want to hear the news? It has some interest, although whether it signifies anything in particular I don’t know. You remember we were told that Lionel and Clarissa couldn’t remember where they had stayed in Carlisle? Well, either they’re freaks or liars, and I’m inclined to plump for the latter.’

‘You mean that they did not stay in Carlisle at all?’

‘That’s right. I’ve got what looks like evidence of it, too. As you forthrightly indicated, the police can do certain jobs very thoroughly indeed.’

‘So that if they failed to find the hotel where three people of known name and appearance spent a night on a certain date, that hotel is not in the town where it purported to be.’

‘That’s the conclusion I came to, so I decided I wouldn’t stop off at Carlisle, but push on to Glasgow and put up at the Renfrew airport hotel. Mind you, at that point I also had an idea that it might be possible to book in at a place like that pretty easily, because there would be people in and out all the time and anyway it would shorten the second hop up to Inverness. I had also jettisoned any idea of trying to find out where that couple and Catherine had put up for the night in Carlisle. It didn’t seem all that important, anyway.’

‘But you discovered that it might be important after all?’

‘I don’t know, but I thought perhaps you would tell me. You see, it seemed rather a short hop before staying the night. Even Carlisle isn’t all that far from Ardrossan when you’ve got a car. My first bet was that if Carlisle wasn’t the answer, then those three probably stopped off somewhere further south, and that could have been absolutely anywhere.’

‘How did you find out that they had stayed at the airport hotel?’

‘Don’t spoil my story! I found out by asking the sort of direct question to which people are bound to give you a direct answer unless they have something to hide. When I paid my bill I asked the girl at Reception whether some friends

of mine had stayed there recently, a Mr and Mrs Smith accompanied by a Miss Owen. I gave the date, not dreaming that the receptionist would come up with anything, but she very obligingly turned back the register and found the names. Moreover she produced a most startling bit of information. The gentleman had checked out after staying one night, but the ladies had stayed three nights. Of course the girl remembered me from our own homeward stop there, otherwise she might not have been so obliging.'

'I cannot imagine why you questioned the receptionist. As you said yourself, it was most unlikely that the three would have broken their journey at that early stage.'

'I suppose it was because I thought perhaps they had changed their minds and gone up to Inverness after all. It certainly looks as though that is what Lionel did. If he had taken the car he could have got to Inverness the next day, after their overnight stay at Renfrew, done whatever he intended on the second day and picked up Clarissa and Catherine the day after.'

'But Catherine was supposed to be in a hurry to get home. Surely, if Lionel had been as disobliging as you suggest, she would have taken the train. After all, her home is in London and it is a direct run to Euston from Glasgow and takes only about five hours in a fast train.'

'Perhaps a couple of days didn't make all that much difference to her. Perhaps she did not expect Lionel to be gone so long. Perhaps Clarissa begged her to stay as she did not want to be alone in the hotel. Most likely of all, Catherine didn't see the fun of paying a pretty heavy railway fare when, by hanging on for a couple of days, she could get a free ride in Lionel's car.'

'You seem to have covered all the possibilities,' said Dame Beatrice admiringly. 'I wonder whether Lionel *did* go by car? — and whether he stayed a night in Inverness.'

'And whether Owen or Stewart spotted him there. It's a nuisance about Stewart. He ought to be available for questioning, and he isn't.'

'Time will remedy that. Tell me of the rest of your adventures.'

'I didn't have any, except that Clava is an adventure in itself. I'd seen it before, of course, but this tour has made a difference to the way I look at such things. I didn't run into Stewart or Owen, if that's what you mean. I didn't expect to. They must have left Inverness days ago. I put up at the same hotel as the one Owen booked for our party and there I pursued a few enquiries, but beyond establishing that the two had checked out (and both on the same morning) I got nothing except (I rather thought) some suspicious looks. I half thought of telling

the extremely grim-looking lady at the desk that I was a policewoman in plain clothes and flashing Gavin's card at her, but I thought it might lead to complications, so I passed up on that little bit of fun.'

'Your mind works in a mysterious way, its wonders to perform.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning that by making a connection which only your subconscious mind recognised as *being* a connection, you have advanced our enquiry to a stage at which theory can be discarded and facts can be checked.'

'I don't know what you mean and I don't suppose it's any good asking questions.'

'There is one question you can ask, but not of me. Ask the airways people for a timetable of flights to and from Stornoway. It may be useful and it may not, but it is one of the stones which we ought not to leave unturned.'

The next thing was that Dame Beatrice had a visit from Marsh. His news was that the Scottish police had obtained identification of the woman found at Callanish. He was obliged to admit that the identification did not help his own enquiry. It did not seem as though there could be any connection between this woman's death and the murder of Catherine Owen except the manner of both.

'She was simply on holiday on Lewis,' Marsh said, 'staying on one of the crofts. The crofter did not report her as missing until he and his wife got back from the mainland, where they had been spending a fortnight with the wife's mother. Then they found that their tenant's suitcase was still in the house, but that she herself was not. They had expected that she would be gone by the time they got back, so the presence of the suitcase puzzled them. After a bit they examined it, but it contained nothing except the woman's clothes. There was nothing suspicious about it.'

It appeared that, being cautious people, they had waited a couple of days and then decided that her absence had better be reported. All that they had expected to hear was that she had been taken ill, or had met with an accident and was in hospital and so had not missed the suitcase or enquired after it.

They did not work the croft, any more than many of the islanders do. The man had a car and a job in Stornoway and they let the house, a comparatively modern one, for a fortnight in the summer, but only upon recommendation. They did not advertise it. Their first tenant had been the wife's cousin, who lived in Liverpool, and from that time, six years ago, they had never needed to leave the house empty while they were absent.

'Not that they would have troubled about that, Dame Beatrice,' Marsh

explained. 'Never even bothered to lock the door. Nobody on the island would pinch anything from another islander. Why, lots of 'em have got the same surname. They're mostly MacLeods unless they're MacDonalds, Morrisons, Mackenzies, MacIvers or MacLeans. There are other names, of course, but those are commonest.'

'Are there any Smiths on the island?' asked Dame Beatrice. The inspector consulted a printed leaflet. 'They sent me this,' he said. 'Just a courtesy gesture, I guess. Yes, ma'am, Smiths come in seventh place, followed by MacKay, Murray, Campbell, MacAulay, Nicholson and Graham. You're thinking of Mr Lionel and Mrs Clarissa Smith, no doubt, as they are the last people known to have seen Miss Owen alive, but there is no connection at all. The tenant's name was Lemon, and she was recommended by a Mr and Mrs Counter, who had rented the croft the year before. The owners remembered the names of their various tenants, but don't seem to have kept records of their home addresses. Anyway, this woman Lemon was a Londoner. That much they do remember. Her murder was a London job, I reckon. Nobody resident on the island would have murdered her. Her past must have caught up with her somehow.'

'Her very recent past, I imagine, Inspector. Surely the stone circles in which both bodies were deposited, combined with Professor Owen's tour, must be more than a matter of coincidence? Are you keeping in touch with the Scottish police?'

'Oh, yes, Dame Beatrice. They don't believe in coincidence any more than you do.'

'Oh, I do not discount it, by any means, but I prefer to test human action and reaction before I admit to it. They do not think that the deaths of Miss Owen and of this Mrs — or Miss — Lemon were connected, then?'

'No, ma'am. Still, work shared is work halved, like trouble and grief, I suppose, so, while we shall be prosecuting our enquiries here, well, if it helps at the Stornoway end, so much the better, although I think they've put their problems in the lap of the Metropolitan Police; since the woman came from London.'

'Here is the current timetable for British Airways' Scottish flights,' said Laura, producing it with something of a flourish. 'It goes from the beginning of April to the end of October, so it covers the period we want. What did you mean about my subconscious mind? How does it connect with my questions at Renfrew?'

'Airport hotel. Flights from Glasgow to Inverness. Flights from Inverness to

Stornoway and,' said Dame Beatrice, who had been turning over the pages of the timetable while Laura was talking, 'I see that there is a non-stop flight from Stornoway to Glasgow and on to London.'

'But the Smiths and Catherine wouldn't have *flown* from Glasgow. Lionel had his car.'

'True, but I must acquaint Inspector Marsh with the result of your enquiries.' She laid down the timetable and Laura picked it up.

'It still leaves everything wide open,' she said. 'I see what you mean, of course. Lionel could have flown from Renfrew, changed planes at Inverness, gone on to Stornoway, murdered this woman — '

'Lemon. The Scottish police have got as far as knowing her name and that she came from London.'

'So did Catherine come from London and so do millions of other people. If Doctor Johnson loved it so much, I wonder why he called it the Great Wen?'

'Perhaps he was enamoured of steaming, festering slums and stinking suppuration.'

'Well, he knew how to distinguish between "to smell" and "to stink", anyway. To return to what I was saying: if Lionel could have made the flight from Glasgow to Stornoway, so could either Owen or Stewart from Inverness, so I can't see we're any further forward.'

'As I believe I pointed out earlier, there is this much: the police will want to know why Lionel and Clarissa stated that they had spent one night in Carlisle whereas they broke their journey in Glasgow and the two women spent three nights at the airport hotel while Lionel was off on his mysterious journey. I really think we must talk to him and Clarissa again.'

'You know, it looks pretty bad for Lionel.'

'There is certainly some explanation due from him.'

'Those two could have told the police about the stop off at the airport hotel instead of handing out all those lies about Carlisle. The fact that they didn't is going to make things very awkward for them. The whole thing turns now on whether the police can prove that Lionel went to Stornoway.'

'And, if he did, what connection he had with the woman who was murdered. That you found it so simple a matter to find out that those three had stayed at the Renfrew airport hotel, added to the fact that Lionel appears to have checked in and out of it in a perfectly open and proper manner, disposes me to think that there may be some innocent explanation of his actions.'

'If only he'd said that they stayed where they did, instead of giving out all

that rubbish about Carlisle, I might agree.'

'Please remember that by the time they were questioned by the police, and then by us, Catherine's body had been found and they were the last people known to have been in her company. Anybody, innocent or guilty, can be excused for panicking under such circumstances.'

'If they *are* brother and sister and Catherine had found that out and was blackmailing them, wouldn't that have been a motive for murdering her to save a nasty scandal? After all, they were passing themselves off as a married couple. There is this job they're so keen on. If it calls for a husband and wife partnership, well, it doesn't call for a brother and sister set-up, does it?'

'You raise an interesting point. So long as the hostel gets a warden and a housekeeper, I cannot see that it makes the slightest practical difference whether they are husband and wife or brother and sister. As for Lionel and Clarissa, their claim on the tour to be a married couple was weakened, it seems to me, by their refusal ever to book a double room. That was bound to encourage speculation, one would have thought.'

'Do you mean you think they are innocent of causing Catherine's death?'

'At the moment I have no idea. I would remind you, however, of a basic principle. It is not innocence which needs to be proved, but guilt.'

'In theory, yes,' said Laura, 'but would you say that it always holds good in practice? During my very short time as a schoolmarm we had a case of the theft of money from a kid's locker. Of course, according to school rules, it shouldn't have been there in the first place, but it *was* there, and, as the child herself said, it wented. Well, of course, there had to be an investigation which involved a wholesale turning out of blazer pockets and school holdalls and so forth. Wasn't everybody except the thief having to prove innocence?'

Dame Beatrice cackled, but did not answer the very pertinent question.

'I shall tackle Lionel again while the police are checking airlines from Glasgow and Inverness,' she said. 'He will have to give me an explanation of how he spent those days while Catherine and Clarissa were at the airport hotel. It is a great pity that he did not tell the police the truth about that stop-over, but reactions to fear are instinctive, unpredictable and often very ill-advised.'

She did not take Laura with her, but, driven by her chauffeur George, she descended upon Lionel without warning. She found him alone. Clarissa, he explained, had gone shopping.

'I've had the police here again,' he said. 'Have you come on the same sort of errand?'

‘Yes, of course I have,’ she answered briskly. ‘What did they want to know?’

‘More about our stay on that nightmare journey home from Ardrossan.’

‘Let us go back to the beginning of that journey. At what point did Catherine disclose that she knew you and Clarissa were not married?’

Lionel evinced no surprise.

‘She did not disclose it at all. Why should she have done? I suppose, in the end, everybody knew it,’ he said resignedly.

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, with her crocodile grin, ‘if you really intended an innocent deception, you should at least have asked Professor Owen to book a double room for you at the hotels. There are such things as twin beds, you know. Many married couples prefer them to the wider, more connubial couch.’

‘Clarissa suggested it. She said that if we were going to pass ourselves off as a married couple in our new job, we might as well begin by practising how to give a convincing impression. I couldn’t agree. If anything ever came out, no matter how innocent we really were — and I assure you, Dame Beatrice, that incest is to my mind the truly unforgivable sin — Clarissa would be branded for the rest of her life. We could never have lived down such an accusation.’

‘Well, by taking this post as warden of a hostel with your sister passing herself off as your wife, you have laid yourself wide open to such an accusation in any case. It would not need a very intensive enquiry, I imagine, to prove the true relationship between the two of you. And what about your self-imposed status? Could you sustain it indefinitely?’

‘I *could* have done, I think. From my observation of the married couples of my acquaintance, they appear to drift, after a year or two, into the same kind of easy comradeship as that which has always obtained between myself and my sister, and often have separate bedrooms, I believe.’

‘Mr Smith, what did you do, and where did you go, when you left your sister and Miss Owen at the Renfrew airport hotel?’

This time Lionel did betray surprise.

‘So they found out about that, did they?’ he said.

‘Well, whether “they” did or not, it is known. Please answer my question.’

‘All right. At Ardrossan I was sure the story had got about that Clarissa and I were brother and sister. At Glasgow I got cold feet, took my car and went to see the Dean of the college and confess to my lies. You may have noticed that at Kilmartin Clarissa and I were at loggerheads. It was on this very point. I said I was going to tell the Dean that we had got the hostel job under false pretences. This upset her very much, but in the end I talked her round to my point of view,

so now my conscience is clear and all is well.'

Chapter 17

THE HUNT IS UP

‘The hunt is up,
The hunt is up,
And now it is almost day;
And he that’s in bed with another man’s wife,
It is time to get him away.’
Old Song in the version collected by Geoffrey Grigson.



The Dean was in residence and welcomed Dame Beatrice warmly. He was a man of about forty, impeccably dressed in a light-grey suit, dark-blue shirt and a bold tie worthy of a BBC announcer. He was clean-shaven, beautifully manicured and his handshake was agreeably firm.

‘I won’t ask to what am I indebted; sufficient unto the day are the perks thereof,’ he said. ‘Do sit down. Sherry?’

‘I have come to ask a great favour concerning a very private and particular matter and am greatly concerned lest, in treading upon delicate ground, I find myself in a morass,’ said Dame Beatrice. The Dean poured sherry, handed her a glass, seated himself, hitched up his immaculate trousers and displayed socks which matched his shirt. He said unconcernedly, ‘Oh, you’ve come about Lionel Smith.’

‘This omniscience is both startling and reassuring,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘He did come to see you, then?’

‘Yes, the foolish, conscience-stricken fellow. What does it matter to me whether his housekeeper is his sister or his cousin or his aunt?’

‘You take a broad view.’

‘My dear Dame Beatrice, we live in the age in which we live. If we serve the conventions at all, it is only lip-service. In any case Smith told me no lies. He brought his sister to the interview and introduced her simply as Clarissa. I took it for granted that they were husband and wife. The young woman will be known as Mrs Smith on the official documents merely for the sake of convenience, but I have no doubt that, among the students, a nickname will soon be found for her. This couple exactly fulfil our requirements. The girl has excellent qualifications in housecraft and dietetics and is a *cordon bleu* cook. The man has an excellent reputation as an organiser of school activities and a modern languages degree. The combination of talents is as rare as it is beautiful. The hostel is one for mature students, many of whom are married and most of whom have been given the opportunity to take a six-months’ course of study to further the requirements of their firms, so every two terms the population of the hostel will change to some extent. I foresee no complications and have told Mr Smith as much.’

‘So bang goes Lionel’s motive for murdering Catherine and there can be nothing to connect him with the Lewis murder,’ said Laura, when she heard the news, ‘so it boils down to Owen and Stewart, I suppose.’

‘We have disposed of one motive, but the Smiths may have another,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out. ‘In fact, were I in cynical vein, I might suggest that, if Lionel and Clarissa are guilty, the wisest move Lionel could have made was to dispose of his obvious motive for wanting Catherine out of the way in the hope that his real motive would not be investigated.’

‘So you haven’t written him off?’

‘Not yet.’

The next day they received a visit from Dame Beatrice’s friend the Chief Constable.

‘Thought you’d like to know that Marsh has had a report from the London end,’ he said. ‘There is no doubt Miss Catherine Owen made it as far as Heathrow. She was certainly alive up to that point. It seems the Smiths stayed there with her until she flagged down a cruising taxi and there is plenty of evidence that she got back to her Maida Vale flat all right. It’s true the other tenants were on holiday, but she waylaid the milkman next morning, and that date and that of the next day, when she had another pint bottle, are down in his book. He hasn’t been paid, and there were no more requests for milk. He wasn’t bothered. He assumed she was off on holiday again and would pay when she came back. She had been a regular customer for years. Before she went on the tour she had cancelled the milk for a fortnight, so he assumed she had popped in at home unexpectedly and was off again to complete her holiday.’

‘Inspector, the hunt, I think, is up, and I have some indication of the line of country over which we must now follow the fox,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Do you approve of fox-hunting, then, ma’am?’

‘I take Oscar Wilde’s view of the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable, but we must also give sympathetic consideration to the distress of Old Mother Slipper-Slopper.’

‘Ma’am?’

‘She jumped out of bed,’ explained Dame Beatrice, ‘and out of the window she popped her grey head, saying, “Oh, John, John! The grey goose is dead, and the fox is over the down-O.” One feels that the dead goose also merits more than a passing sigh.’

‘I give up, ma’am but if there’s something you can see that will help us, you’re more than welcome to your nursery rhymes.’

‘Folk-songs, Inspector — although the two have much in common, since both often have a hidden meaning — hidden to us, I mean, but perfectly clear to the people of the time. Have you contacted Miss Owen’s lawyer?’

‘The London end did. Motive, you mean? It’s only a guide, at best, ma’am.’

‘As I know full well. Who stands to benefit?’

‘Professor Owen.’

‘He might be in a hurry to inherit.’

‘His circumstances are being investigated, but there is no shortage of cash where he is concerned, no rash financial commitments and no outstanding debts.’

‘Indeed a model citizen! Neither wine nor women?’

‘His private life can bear the closest scrutiny, Dame Beatrice, and I’m told he has no ear for song.’

‘I am delighted, Inspector, that you not only possess a sense of humour but that you can cap a quotation.’

‘The job doesn’t give all that much scope for either, ma’am.’ He paused. Dame Beatrice waited. ‘Besides, there’s another thing,’ he added at last. ‘You might think that, as Miss Catherine’s heir — she was worth about thirty thousand pounds, it seems, which isn’t a lot by present-day standards, but might be a temptation to some people — he might have been tempted to kill her and inherit, but as it happens, he wouldn’t have had very long to wait for his money, and it seems he knew it. The poor lady hadn’t got much longer to go. She would have died within a couple of years. He had no need whatever to hasten the end.’

‘He knew as much? Yes, he told me so. When did she alter her will?’

‘Alter it, ma’am?’

‘Yes. Professor Owen told me that the will might be in Mr Stewart’s favour. I gather she was interested in Stewart’s researches and wanted to help him. If Stewart did not know of her terminal illness, he might have had a motive to kill her.’

When Marsh had gone, Dame Beatrice said to Laura, ‘Do you still have your shorthand notes of those answers to the Truth Game?’

‘Yes. I don’t destroy anything until you say so.’

‘Read me Catherine Owen’s answers. They may tell us something more than they did at the time.’

‘“I came on this tour to try to get copy for my next novel,” ’ read Laura aloud.

‘“If I had not come I might have missed a most wonderful experience. My secret fear is of confined spaces.” ’

‘Many women are claustrophobic. There seems nothing in that statement worthy of comment.’

‘ “...And my pet superstition is that hell has no fury like a disappointed man.” ’

‘They are interesting answers. She has begged one question and used a misquotation instead of a superstition for her last answer. I wonder whether by that time she had altered her will, or whether she was still only thinking about doing so?’

‘And whether anybody else knew it was altered or was going to be altered?’

‘I think somebody may have guessed, although Owen said that she was secretive and I believe she was. She was also cautious, I would imagine, but apparently not cautious enough.’

‘Not cautious enough to save herself from being murdered, you mean? It sounds like a revenge job to me, and that means Stewart. She may not have told him about the altered will, but I bet she had told him she was going to marry Owen, if only to choke him off. Owen told you Stewart was giving her a bit of a rush. Perhaps (although I dislike being cynical) that accounts for her first will having been made in Stewart’s favour. It wouldn’t be the first time a gigolo has benefited from some sex-starved older woman.’

‘The shocking way in which your imagination works delights me. Let us have more of this Yellow Book reconstruction of events which will have to be proved.’

‘You can rib me as much as you like, but you still see Stewart as the murderer, the same as I do. I bet he needed her money to further his stone-circle researches.’

‘I am not prepared to say more than that somebody — Stewart or Owen or another, maybe Capella, if we are thinking in terms of revenge — had cause to bear Catherine ill-will.’

‘The disappointed man bit points straight at Stewart.’

‘I think the sooner the young man is available for questioning, the sooner we may be able to get to the bottom of this business, but, since he is not available at the moment, others may be able to help us.’

‘Able, yes, but willing?’

‘Time will show.’

‘There is just one point bothering me a bit,’ said Laura. ‘This job which Lionel and Clarissa have got lined up is in Lancashire. Why didn’t Lionel wait until they got further south before going busting off to the Dean to confess to his innocent deception? I don’t know why he went at all. He hadn’t told the Dean any lies. Why get such a sudden rush of conscience that he left the two women at

Renfrew and went careering off?’

‘Perhaps we shall have an opportunity to ask him when we meet him again.’

‘May I ask a civil but possibly unanswerable question?’

‘I will answer before you ask it. Even in view of what has happened, I still have no idea which member of the party Professor Owen thought needed my watchful eye when he invited us to join the tour, or whether he really had any such thought at all. In any case, unless and until people ask for my services, there is nothing I can do, or would be prepared to do. Even when it was suggested to me that Professor Owen wanted a private eye kept on the party, I did not believe it. If he had said so, it would have been a different matter. As it was, I had no suspicions until he made me the judge in that Truth Game competition and Catherine’s answers were stolen. Even then I was inclined to dismiss the incident as an instance of idle curiosity on the part of somebody, probably somebody who saw Catherine as an enigmatic character.’

‘Did you see her as that?’

‘Did you?’

‘No.’

‘A terse, forceful, unequivocal and interesting answer. Neither did I. How *did* she strike you, Laura? You are a shrewd judge of women.’

‘I saw her as a lonely, rather bitter woman, poor soul. I’ll tell you another thing. I believe the reports of that lecture tour in the States were all baloney. I can’t supply chapter and verse, but that’s what I think.’

‘In other words, it was an excuse to leave the party. Something had alarmed or alerted her by the time we left Ardrossan, you think? I am inclined to agree.’

‘Do you know what it was?’

‘I think she may have confided to Stewart that she intended to marry Owen, or to Owen that she intended to marry Stewart.’

‘So the issue is still wide open.’

‘We may be able to begin closing the door. Ring up the Smiths and put a query to them. Ask whose idea it was to break the journey at Glasgow.’

‘What excuse can I make?’

‘None. People taken completely by surprise will usually tell the truth because they have had no time to invent plausible lies.’

‘Anyway, I thought it was Lionel’s idea.’

Laura went to the telephone and was gone for some time.

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice when she returned, ‘do you require me to have three guesses?’

‘I expect to you one will be enough.’

‘Very well. It was Catherine’s idea that they should break the journey at Glasgow. She wanted to visit the museum there. You see, among other antiquities, it houses four bronze-age cists complete with contents. To see them would have provided for her, no doubt, a fitting conclusion to the tour,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Stewart seems to have found in her an apt and appreciative pupil.’

‘So poor old Lionel, torn between self-interest and his conscience, saw the way clear to nip along to the Dean and make his confession. Yes, that falls into place and seems to make sense, but it doesn’t get us any further in choosing between Owen and Stewart as our murderer.’

‘Much may turn on the terms of Catherine’s will and whether she altered it, or intended to alter it, before she died, or never made a will at all, knowing that, as her next of kin, Owen would benefit in any case.’

‘Everyone has a duty to make a will if they’ve anything to leave.’

‘People are so reluctant to acknowledge in black and white that at some time they have to die.’

‘Oh, Lord!’ exclaimed Laura, who was opening what she called the official correspondence next day. ‘Here is an invitation from Professor Owen for us to attend a reunion party. Not in the best of taste, surely?’

‘You are thinking of Catherine Owen’s death.’

‘Well, what else have we been thinking about?’

‘True. Write back and accept.’

‘It won’t be a representative gathering, you know. Catherine won’t be there, and I don’t suppose the nuns will go. As for Stewart, so far as we know he is still chasing about and adding stone circles to his collection. That leaves you and me, Lionel and Clarissa and Owen himself.’

‘You are omitting Miss Babbacombe-Starr.’

‘She’s got a tutoring job, hasn’t she? She mentioned something of the sort.’

‘For what day of the week is the invitation?’

‘A Saturday. Saturday week.’

‘Well, we know the address of her father’s house and I suppose that is where she will be spending her weekends. Why not find out whether she has been invited and, if she has, whether she intends to accept.’

‘Does it make any difference to us, whether she goes or not?’

‘No. I shall go and you may please yourself. On second thoughts, do not communicate with Miss Starr. We will wait upon events.’

Owen's reunion for the members of his tour who were able to attend it was in the form of a cocktail party, and this was already in the warming-up stage when Dame Beatrice and Laura were shown in. There were others present in the persons, Laura decided, of Owen's colleagues and their wives. Their host greeted the newcomers, found Dame Beatrice a chair and a glass of sherry and, as the most illustrious and widely-known person present, she was soon surrounded.

Laura caught only one or two sentences of the ensuing conversation before, realising that Dame Beatrice had been commandeered by the Faculty and that there was no place in the gathering for herself, she wandered to the edge of the circle. All that she heard before she sighted Stewart and made her way to him was curious but not, at that stage, illuminating.

A very old man leaning on a stick and appearing to be very shortsighted, said in the high and tremulous voice which matched his years, 'And have you known young Le Mans long, my dear lady? I hope he behaved on your trip to the Balkans. He got divorced, you know, the naughty fellow. You can't trust these youngsters who want to take bites at a cherry.' He finished this speech with a shrill burst of laughter. Professor Owen intervened.

'This is Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley,' he shouted in the old man's ear, 'and my name is Owen, as you very well know, my dear Godalming. We went to Scotland, not to the Balkans. We went to look at standing stones.'

Laura moved out of earshot and made her way over to Stewart, who appeared to be presiding over the bar, although a waiter had supplied her with a drink as soon as she and Dame Beatrice had been announced.

Stewart greeted her with a smile.

'Hullo there, Mrs Laura of the welcome presence!' he said. 'Thank God for the sight of a Christian soul in this Roman Saturnalia! What's that you're holding? One of Owen's almost nonalcoholic specials? Tip it into the garbage pail — which is to say, leave it on the end of the table and have a drop of honest Scotch.'

Laura accepted this advice and then she said, 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'No. I had hoped to be still on the job for my thesis, but hotels and transport came rather expensive, so I'll have to get back to work until the spring and carry on from there.'

'Aren't you a little bit surprised at Owen's throwing a party so soon after — ?'

'After Catherine's death? No, I'm not really surprised. He wasn't all that

fond of her and he's a cold sort of fish, anyway.'

'I would have thought *she* was the cold fish. That's how she struck me.'

'You'd be surprised. She and I were going to be married, you know.'

'Really? Well, I hope I'm not talking out of turn, but I quite thought that if you were going to take on anybody, it would be Capella.'

'That female kid? Good Lord, no. I may have chatted her up a bit, but that was only to keep my hand in and put Owen off the scent. Capella? Dear, dear! Who wants a wife who sees fairies at the bottom of the garden?'

'Well, you could have fooled me,' said Laura.

'Yes. Perhaps I overdid it a bit. Catherine seemed to think so. She got me on my own at Kilmartin and made herself very clear. I explained it was to put Owen off the scent and reminded her that he would take a dim view if he knew we had a clear understanding and were only waiting for the registrar to pronounce the magic words. Owen had ideas of his own, you see. They were first cousins, but the law of the land allows cousins to marry, so I was rather a spoke in his wheel.'

'Were you fond of Catherine?'

'She was very beautiful.'

'And had a lot of money.'

'You are a deep thinker, Mrs Laura. All the same, I wouldn't have married a moron or an old or ugly woman, and I would have made Catherine a good husband.'

'When did you hear the news?'

'Not until I got back from Ireland. When I had seen Clava and the passage graves and ring cairns. I went to Loanhead of Daviot, across the moor. Hired a car. I wondered whether Owen would opt to join me, but he wasn't keen.'

'When did you see him last?'

'Before today? Oh, the night we were all together in Inverness. I didn't want him with me at Clava, so I was away before any of you were up, and I didn't go back to Inverness. Since then I've been to several sites, one after another, and finished up in Ireland. I would have liked to stay longer, but the cash began to run out. Drombeg, in Cork, is a perfect circle, with the sea just over the horizon, and there are three circles in Wicklow, with a specially fine one at Boleycarrigeen. Then I went to the amazing complex at Millin Bay in County Down. There's nothing whatever like it in this country.'

'Glad you had such a good time,' said Laura, deciding to cut the recital short. 'Well, I'd better circulate, I suppose.'

'I can't, thank goodness. I'm anchored here.'

Laura went over to Lionel and Clarissa and was making easy, rather pointless conversation with them when Capella came in. She greeted Owen, who came forward to welcome her and then went over to Laura. Lionel and Clarissa drifted off to join the group around Dame Beatrice, and Stewart came across with a glass which he handed to Capella.

‘Welcome to the revels,’ he said.

‘Thank you.’ she replied. ‘Am I the last to come?’

‘The very last. We don’t expect the Sisters and there is another absentee, of course, unfortunately.’

‘What have you been doing since we left Inverness?’

‘Going to and fro. How did you find Callanish? Did you see the stones by moonlight?’

‘Yes, and we saw something else by moonlight, too.’

‘Oh, really? What was that?’

‘A bad dream, a dream that came true.’

‘Yes? You must tell me about it sometime. I’d better get back to my bottles.’

Dame Beatrice came over as he took himself off and said that, when Laura was ready, she thought they should leave. She said to Capella, ‘Are you working?’

‘Not until next week.’

‘Then why not spend a few days with us?’ The visit was arranged there and then. Laura was to pick Capella up in Oxford in two days’ time and she was to spend a week at the Stone House before taking up the tutoring assignment she had been promised.

‘Are you going to pump her about Stewart?’ Laura asked, when she and Dame Beatrice were on their way home.

‘There may be a little sifting of the evidence,’ Dame Beatrice admitted. ‘I shall be interested to hear of any reaction which she experienced when she met Stewart again. I noticed that when we were saying goodbye to Professor Owen she was already gravitating towards the young man.’

‘Girls are damn fools,’ said Laura. ‘I don’t like that boy. Never have.’

‘Did you ever read *Huntingtower*?’

‘John Buchan? Oh, rather! Revelled in it, although I preferred *John McNab*. Why?’

‘Because *Huntingtower* suggested something to me which I would not have thought of without its help, but which, for what it is worth, I have passed to the police.’

‘Well, now,’ said Laura, ‘I know the book inside out. Ought it to suggest something to me?’

‘Oh, I am sure it will. I wonder how the police are getting on? It must be very difficult to trace holiday passengers in August, but, no doubt, with their resources, they will be able to manage it.’

Laura looked at Dame Beatrice enquiringly, but met nothing but a bland, noncommittal smile.

‘So you know the answer,’ she said.

‘I knew the answer some time ago, and so did you, but we still have to prove that it is correct,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Not us, but the police, you mean.’

‘They need something they can take into court, and I cannot give it to them yet. We may know more when they have found out, on my advice, when and where Mrs Lemon was married.’

‘So there *is* a connection between the murders.’

‘Oh, there had to be. People who murder more than once nearly always repeat the method. The death of poor Catherine is a case in point.’

On the following morning there was a call from Marsh. He had been in touch with Catherine’s lawyers. She had made no valid will, although they had always advised her that to remain intestate gave the executors a lot of unnecessary trouble and made equally unnecessary delays in administering the estate. However, she had told them, only a week or so before her death and in a letter from Scotland, that she had changed her mind. She was engaged to be married and proposed to make a formal declaration of her intentions in order to be fair to somebody who would have expected to benefit a great deal more than she now intended that he should. She said she had warned him of this.

‘Hell knows no fury like a disappointed man,’ quoted Laura to Dame Beatrice when she delivered the message. ‘I suppose she spoke her own death sentence.’

‘Exactly,’ Dame Beatrice agreed. ‘Ring Inspector Marsh again and tell him I am expecting to attend an autumn solstice and its revels. Add that, whether invited or not, you and I will be among those present and would welcome his company. I think he may have reached our own conclusions by now.’

‘Do you think Capella will keep the date?’

‘Yes, since she believes that the invitation comes from Stewart.’

‘I suppose you think young girls are very silly.’

‘They are as God made them, I suppose.’

Chapter 18

CAPELLA AND THE KING STONE

‘And ever about that knight’s middle
Of silver bells are nine;
And no maid goes to Carterhaugh
And maid returns again.’

Tam Lin (**Border ballad**)



On the following day, when she had sorted out the correspondence, answered such letters as lay within her province and taken dictation from Dame Beatrice for all the others except for her own private post, Laura took *Huntingtower* from the library shelf which she and her employer reserved for light literature and settled down to study John Buchan's fascinating adventure story.

She found what she thought she was looking for and when lunch had been cleared away she said, 'I think I've got it. Leon equals Lean; Spittal equals Spidel; therefore Le Mans equals Lemon; but how did you tumble to it? That gaga old gentleman at the cocktail party, I suppose. It wouldn't have occurred to me in a thousand years.'

'You do yourself an injustice. However, I have given the police my theory. If they do not choose to act on it I can do no more, but when their own enquiries are completed I think they and I will be in full accord. You ask me how I tumbled to it. I will put the same question to you.'

'Well, I suppose it was the foreign names angle. In the book, both Leon and Spidel had foreign names which, spoken, could sound like Scottish ones, particularly as L-E-A-N in Scotland is pronounced *Lane* in English. Spittal, well, it's the Highland word for a hospice or perhaps a hospital, although hospice is more likely. Spidel sounds sufficiently like it, but is completely foreign. All the same, you know, Lemon, whether it's spelt with one M or two, is not such an uncommon name. There are a dozen Lemons or more in our local telephone directory. I guess it's nothing to do with fruit, but harks back to the old word *leman*, meaning a sweetheart.'

'Your erudition soars beyond my grasp. Do we expect the young Capella for lunch tomorrow?'

'I should think so. I'll make an early start and pick her up in good time.' At this moment the telephone rang. Laura went off to answer it. 'Inspector Marsh,' she said, when she came back. 'He thanks you for your tip about the air service between London, Glasgow, Inverness and Stornoway. He says there's a combined operation going on and he hopes to report progress shortly. He is sure you're right and he only wishes he had some excuse for holding the man while the police conclude their enquiries.'

Capella, when Laura presented her at the Stone House, had news. It came

first in the form of a question.

‘Are you going to the equinox party?’ she asked.

‘The autumn equinox?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes. It’s being held at midnight on September twenty-second. Stewart is arranging it. It’s to be held in a stone circle, but he doesn’t know yet which one. You will come, won’t you? Everybody is being invited. It ought to be fun.’

‘We don’t keep blind dates,’ said Laura. ‘Did Stewart invite you while you were at Professor Owen’s?’

‘No. Professor Owen told me about it after Stewart had gone.’

‘What do you think of that stone circle party?’ asked Laura, when Capella had gone to bed.

‘I await our invitation to it,’ Dame Beatrice replied. The week passed pleasantly with walks and drives in and around the New Forest and Capella went home delighted with her visit. She wrote her thanks and said that she had received a formal invitation from Stewart in the form of a typewritten card.

‘Ring up,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and find out exactly how the invitation was worded and what was the postmark on the envelope.’ Laura asked no questions, did as she was asked and came back with the answer.

‘Stewart requests the pleasure of your company at the Rollright Stones at eleven-thirty for twelve on the night of September twenty-second when the autumnal equinox will be celebrated in honour of Catherine Owen, deceased. No R.S.V.P. required. Wilt thou at Ninny’s tomb meet me straightway?’

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and the postmarks?’

‘She’s chucked away the envelope and didn’t look at the postmark.’

‘What was the address on the card?’

‘I asked. There wasn’t one. But no R.S.V.P? That’s funny! I suppose she had already accepted. I wish I knew what this is in aid of. It seems, apart from all else, in very bad taste. ‘In honour of Catherine Owen, deceased’ indeed! And to hold a party where her body was found! Extraordinary ideas some people have; and that means Stewart. The bit of nonsense from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is typical of his sense of humour.’

‘Which perhaps somebody besides yourself has studied.’

Capella dismissed the taxi, left the village in which, to her relief, lights were still burning, and made her way towards the stone circle.

The sun had set at seven and there had been a daylight moon which set at about a quarter to eight that evening, so, once she had left the village behind her, she had no comfort except the torch she had brought with her and the stars in the

clear sky.

She had lunched as well as dined at a hotel in Chipping Norton and had spent the afternoon in making sure that she could find her way on foot from Little Rollright to the Stones. She experienced no difficulty after she had left the taxi, but did not notice, as she passed it that there were two private cars in the lay-by. The occupants were aware of her passing, and two men got out of one of the cars and went up to the other, which contained two women.

‘He’ll think your car is simply the one she came in,’ said a low voice, speaking in at the open window of the women’s car, ‘so we’ll move out now. The other one, if you’re right, may be early, so we had better be on the spot. There may be nothing in it, but better safe than sorry, and you’ve been right about everything else.’

The car drove off, but not towards the village. It continued on down the lane past the King Stone on the left, and, a little further on, stopped just beyond the path which skirted the reaped and empty barley field. The occupants of the second car got out and walked to the stone circle. The entrance was closed, as they had expected, but under the stars the stones themselves, dark, misshapen and appallingly like crippled and evil men, stood in their timeless ring, reinforced by the bits and pieces of which the ravages of the upland weather had robbed them and which some pious or tidy-minded hands had added to the original circle.

Having made their survey, the watchers melted away without exchanging a word and five minutes later Capella walked up to the spot on which they had stood. The air was chilly, but her involuntary shivering was from apprehension, not from cold. She glanced round and was aware that someone was approaching her. A spotlight from a torch shone on her and a voice said,

‘Ah, splendid! I saw your car in the lay-by and hoped I should find you here. Well, shall we make for the meeting-place?’

‘Oh, Professor Owen! I’m glad to see you,’ she said with great relief. ‘I was beginning to wish I had not come. Where are the others?’

‘Oh, coming, coming. All will be with us anon.’

They moved off down the lane, but at the stile leading to the King Stone, Capella said, ‘I’m not going any further.’

‘Oh, but surely! Our rendezvous is with the Whispering Knights.’

‘Mine isn’t.’ She stood still. ‘Let’s wait here until the rest of them come.’

‘They are probably in position already.’

‘I don’t think so. We would have heard them from here.’ Suddenly all the

apprehension she had felt when she had stood and looked at the crowded circle of misshapen stones less than five minutes before, almost overwhelmed her. 'I'm going back to the lay-by to meet them,' she said.

'Not before you tell me what Catherine said to you before she left Ardrossan.' He put an authoritative hand on her arm.

'But she said nothing to me,' said Capella. 'What are you talking about?' She shook off his hand.

'You are a very attractive girl,' he said, this time putting an arm round her shoulders, 'and you must not tell lies. *What did she say?* She told you, and you only, that she was going to marry Stewart, didn't she?'

Capella twisted herself from his grasp and ran to the stile which led to a path to the King Stone. Clumsily, because of the darkness combined with her feeling of terror, she half-climbed, half-tumbled over it, regained her balance and began to run uphill towards the Stone. Over the brow of the hill the stars were clustered about its head. She hoped that one of them was Capella, the star for whom she was named.

'You must help me!' she cried wordlessly to the shapeless mass of time-eaten limestone. 'I didn't betray you! I only took back an oath I couldn't keep. Hide me! Hide me!'

She reached the iron railings, almost fell against them, clasped them with both hands and fought for breath after her panic-stricken run up the hill. She was in a state of quite unreasoning terror, convinced not only that Owen was pursuing her as Daphne was pursued, but that it was not in the least likely that she herself would be saved by being turned into a laurel tree, still less that she would be turned to stone to become the stone king's paramour.

Owen, making heavy going on the steep slope, was uttering hoarse, meaningless noises, but he was getting nearer. She let go of the railings and dodged behind the stone. Then began a deadly and terrifying game of catch-as-catch-can. It did not last for long. There was a pounding of boots on the hill and a voice shouted, 'We're here, miss! Run for the stile!'

Obedient, as women will, a confident male command, Capella eluded Owen, who was closing in, and raced downhill. At the stile were Laura and Dame Beatrice.

'Can Marsh hold on to Owen long enough to complete the evidence against him of murdering those two women?' Laura enquired.

'Oh, yes. The police will charge him with attempted rape, although, but for her quick thinking in making for the King Stone, which gave her a chance to

elude him, I think that he would have murdered her. He is quite unhinged.'

'You might have told me you thought all the time that Owen was the murderer.'

'I am not sure that I did think of him all the time. The tour was over before I thought of him at all, and even then there were other candidates for the role of murderer. If Catherine knew, or even if she only surmised, that Lionel and Clarissa were passing as husband and wife, they had a strong motive for getting her out of the way.'

'But they wouldn't have needed to murder Mrs Le Mans as well.'

'Until Catherine was murdered in exactly the same way, Mrs Le Mans did not fit into the picture at all. Still, so long as murderers insist on repeating their methods, people such as the police and myself stand a fair chance of catching them.'

'But you had your doubts about Owen long before either of the murders took place, didn't you?'

'Doubts, in a sense, yes, but I did not envisage him as a murderer. The doubts began when rumours reached me that I had been invited to join the tour for a reason I had not been given. I dismissed them at first because they emanated from the mischievous Stewart and I put their dissemination down to his slightly perverted sense of humour.'

'But then there was the Truth Game.'

'Yes, indeed. Perhaps that was the beginning of my suspicions. The game was played under rules invented by Owen and I was soon fairly certain that it was he who entered my room that night and purloined Catherine's set of answers.'

'It could just as well have been Lionel or Clarissa, as I think we said at the time.'

'Oh, yes, and I bore them in mind. However, I always came back to the fact that it was Owen who invented that strange version of the game.'

'Suppose you had not left your door open while you were out of the room, how would he have got possession of Catherine's answers?'

'He would probably have asked me to allow him to look over all the papers. I should hardly have refused such a request, as he was giving the prize.'

'But he preferred the other method, although it was risky?'

'Apparently he did.'

'He must somehow have kept in touch with his ex-wife, but why did he need to kill her?'

‘As a matter of expediency. It was Catherine who had to die before she could marry Stewart, but I think he felt that his wife would know who Catherine’s murderer was, and so she had to be disposed of first; that, of course, is only guesswork on my part, but the air service between Inverness and Stornoway made the whole enterprise feasible.’

‘What did you make of Sister Veronica?’

‘Sister Veronica is gifted with one form of extra-sensory perception and is a religious mystic. In that flitting figure — of a man, remember — I think she saw the spirit of evil. Owen *was* evil, and that fact conveyed itself to her. Unfortunately her extra-sensory powers are limited. She sensed the presence of evil power, but could not determine which of us was the human element through which that power could work.’

‘So that’s why she didn’t see anything at the circles on Machrie Moor. Owen wasn’t with us.’

‘And never again has she visited stone circles when he was present.’

‘Well, there’s one thing: now that a description of Owen can be circulated, the Scottish police ought to be able to trace his movements on Lewis.’

‘Oh, yes. Once the end of a ball of wool is found, the unravelling is merely a matter of time. I imagine we shall find that, although they were divorced, his relationship with his wife had remained outwardly amicable, although I expect the alimony was expensive. But it was when he decided to murder Catherine in order to secure his inheritance that his wife had to be eliminated, too, for the reason I gave you. She probably met him at Stornoway airport with a car by previous arrangement. If you remember, we were all supposed to be going to Lewis in the first place. Oh, well, the rest is a matter of police routine. It may take some time to build up a case, but they will manage it.’

‘Do you know what I think?’ asked Laura.

‘Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t.’

‘I think Owen invited you to join the tour because he realised he was beginning to go over the border and he wanted you to keep an eye on *him*, not on one of the others.’

Dame Beatrice gazed at her secretary in simulated admiration, but there was no time to pursue Laura’s theory because they received an unexpected visit from Stewart. He gave them a lively account of his researches in Ireland and Brittany — ‘Er Lannic and Gavrinis, you know,’ but made no mention of Owen or Capella. Laura asked him whether he had visited the Rollright Stones since his return from Brittany.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said, ‘I went to the Whispering Knights, but never a murmur out of them. The barley had all been reaped.’

‘So Capella wouldn’t have him,’ said Laura later to Dame Beatrice, ‘and a good thing, too. He’s in love with stone circles, not with wedding rings. He’d be the most selfish of husbands.’

‘I suppose man’s love *still* is of man’s life a thing apart,’ said Dame Beatrice sententiously.

‘At any rate, it’s no longer woman’s whole existence, thank goodness!’ retorted Laura.

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[November 18, 2006]